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Interview with THE Vampire

by David Dastmalchian

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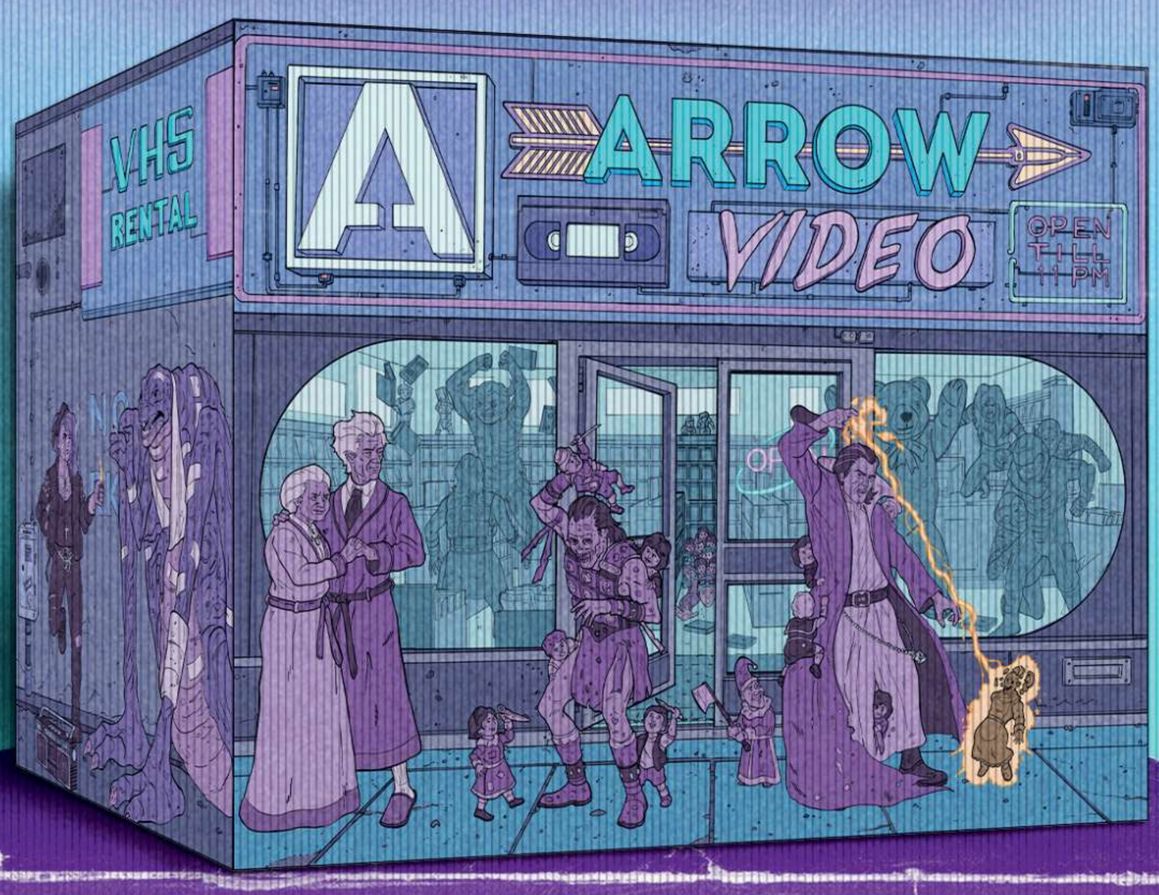

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This issue is dedicated to Brittany Knupper.

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INVOCATION

It Means Something

On page 31 of this issue, actor David Dastmalchian calls his Fango byline "one of the coolest moments of my career." That's a refrain I hear a lot, from both subjects and contributors. I don't claim ownership of the weight that a "printed in Fango" milestone carries for those folks; we owe that to editors David Everitt, Bob Martin, Tony Timpone, Mike Gingold, and Chris Alexander. We owe that to all the contributors who shaped the magazine and the minds who read it over the years.

So I don't take credit, but I do try to take it seriously. I don't go a week without hearing how much being in Fango means to folks like Dastmalchian, and to filmmakers like Laura Moss, and Mike Flanagan, and Jordan Peele. And it meant something to Brittany Knupper.

I met Brittany in 2019 while I was filming a documentary project that she visited to cover for another website. I got to know her a bit – anyone who performed burlesque shows as Hans Gruber or Skeletor was someone I wanted to know more about – and I became a fan of her online presence, her particular blend of chill, nerdy humor, and her very human, honest writing. She became a contributor to our website, a booth captain at our con table and, last issue, she was published in the magazine, talking about how very Cronenbergian her decade-long battle with cancer had been and continued to be.

When the issue was printed, Brittany shared her excitement online about being published. I am told her cancer team enjoyed the issue and, though it's not my story to tell, apparently Joel Coen really enjoyed the piece, and called Sam Raimi to urge him to read it. To Brittany, and to all those folks, it meant something.

The enormity of death, especially the death of a 37-year-old, is almost too much to think about. And as I've said before in this space, I never want to trivialize something so huge by writing about it in a horror entertainment magazine. But I got a note from Brittany's husband in the days following her passing on June 9th that said, "You made one of her biggest dreams come true by publishing her in the magazine." I will be honest with you – that's a lot to hear. She of course deserved to be in the magazine; she wrote a great article. The only thing I hoped publishing Brittany would do for her was give her a small pocket of happiness during one of the hardest battles of her life. It seemed like literally the least I could do (save, perhaps, from urging you to go back to Fango #19 and reading her piece now, if you haven't yet).

But her husband's words stick with me, and the idea that being in the magazine meant THAT much to Brittany is haunting and humbling, and it's not going away. I feel lucky and grateful we were able to give her that milestone. And, going forward, it's a reminder. It's easy to get jaded or cynical in the push to keep these issues coming – this one is my 20th as EIC – and it's easy to forget sometimes, but this go-round I'm especially mindful that what you now hold in your hands still means something, to a lot of people.

Phil Nobile Jr., Editor-in-Chief

The Postal Zone

People are always asking us how they can have their writing published in FANGORIA. Here you go!
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WANTED! MORE READERS/ CONTRIBUTORS/FRIENDS/ HUMANS LIKE:

Brittany Knupper
(1986 - 2023)

DID I MAKE THIS MOVIE UP?

I have very specific memories of a film I may have watched on Elvira's show back in the day. But no one I speak to knows what I'm talking about. I cannot find info about it online, and I'm beginning to think I dreamed it (nightmared?) it.

The general plot was: A mortal man had married the devil and was secretly raising their son. The setting was '70s - '80s urban. At the time there were news reports of a monster terrorizing the city.

I remember two scenes vividly:

1. The man was having a dinner party (the actor playing him was blond with glasses, maybe??). One of the guests snarkily said, "They say the devil is a female, and YOU [the host] married her on her last visit to earth."
2. The final scene: the protagonist is chasing his half-demon son through the streets; the son is the "monster" of the news stories. That's presumably the big reveal: the rumors were true, and the protagonist is just trying to keep his kid under control (aren't we all??). The man yells "Conrad!" at his son to call him home.

Did I dream this up?!?

Thanks, Nora

Nora!

I hope and pray that you did not make this up, because this movie sounds amazing. I have sent your description to the likes of Mike Gingold, Amanda Reyes, Brian Collins and others, and no one can identify this film, though all agree they want to see it. Maybe we should make it? Hit us up. - PN

SEAL OF DISAPPROVAL

The other week I was out of town and my wife got up in the middle of the night to get some water, and she got really creeped out by the *Evil Dead Rise* cover. Seeing a woman covered in gore, wielding a chainsaw is unsettling at 3am in a dark, empty apartment. She quickly flipped the magazine over so she wouldn't have to see it anymore. Sadly, the back had the cover art for *Malum*, which was an even worse sight for her!

That being said, keep up the good work, and to horror filmmakers everywhere, keep up the scary cover art! - Daniel Sukara

Daniel, I've been there; my sainted wife struggles to get through some of the images we print, but that's how we know we're on the right track! Sorry/not sorry to your spouse, but hopefully you won't show her this issue (and definitely don't show her pages 82 & 83). - PN

OUR FAVORITE COSPLAYS FROM TEXAS FRIGHTMARE WEEKEND!:

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MONSTER INVASION

UNTANGLING *COBWEB* WITH SCREENWRITER CHRIS THOMAS DEVLIN

By Brett Gallman

WHEN CHRIS THOMAS DEVLIN FOUND HIMSELF LIVING IN NEW YORK AS AN ASPIRING SCREENWRITER, THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN A DIFFERENT TOWN REMINDED HIM OF ANOTHER ODD, ALIENATING TIME IN HIS LIFE: CHILDHOOD, WHEN THE WORLD IS WEIRD AND TERRIFYING. "THERE'S A CLICHÉ SAYING: JUST WRITE WHAT SCARES YOU," HE EXPLAINS. "I WAS IN A STRANGE NEW CITY AWAY FROM THE INDUSTRY THAT I HAD BEEN WORKING IN FOR SO LONG, AND I HADN'T WRITTEN ANYTHING ORIGINAL IN A LONG TIME, SO I WANTED TO WRITE SOMETHING MAINLY FOR MYSELF. AND I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE TERRIFIED THAN I WAS AS A CHILD JUST LAYING IN BED IN THE DARK AND LISTENING TO EVERY WEIRD CREAK, GROAN, AND TAP."

Devlin's exploration of these primal fears blossomed into *Cobweb*, an unsettling Halloween fable about a lonely boy named Peter (Woody Norman) who hears strange voices emanating from the walls in his house. While the mysterious entity lurking beneath his wallpaper urges him to deal with a bullying problem at school, it also brings cryptic warnings about his parents, an overprotective duo (Lizzy Caplan and Antony Starr) haunted by a girl's mysterious disappearance from the neighborhood some years earlier. But according to the mysterious voice, Peter's parents aren't what they seem, and their erratic behavior alarms a concerned teacher (Cleopatra Coleman) who uncovers the house's horrifying secrets alongside her student.

Cobweb's script thrives on the natural intrigue of its big question: just what is haunting Peter's house? For Devlin, however, uncovering this mystery wasn't paramount to the deliberate, creeping build-up that allowed him to dwell on the "dream logic" of those childhood fears. During our interview, he lands on the word "elemental" to describe Peter's desperate, wayward ordeal. "I wanted to capture that very specific feeling of being a kid and hearing something in the dark in your bedroom and finding out that it might actually

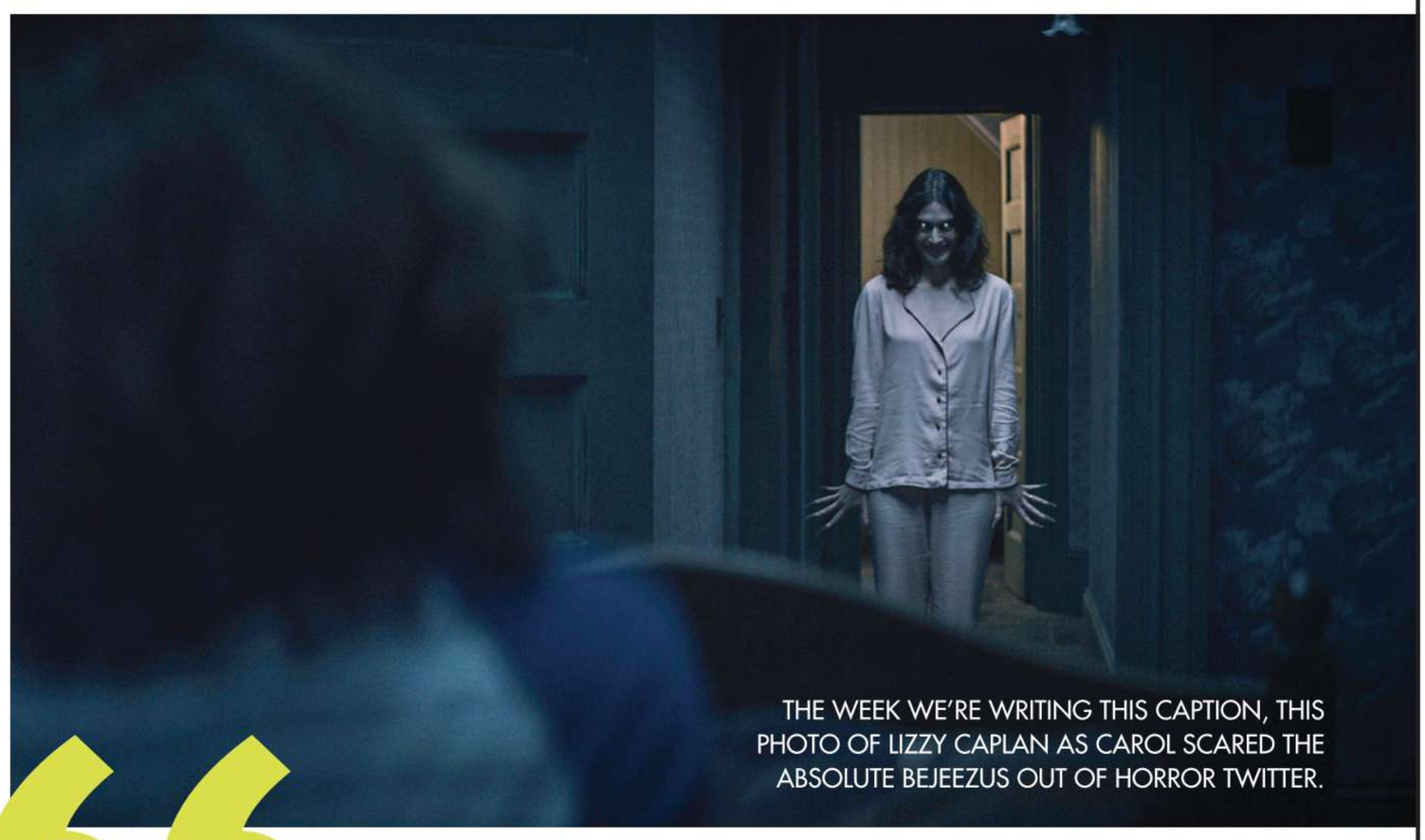
SORRY HE'S NOT HOME RIGHT NOW, PETER'S (WOODY NORMAN) WALKING INTO SPIDERWEBS.

be the thing that you're terrified it might be," he says. Obscuring the nature of these fears throughout *Cobweb* was also instrumental in capturing a crucial aspect of Peter's young mind. "Another thing I feel like was very present in my childhood was feeling confused all the time," Devlin adds. "You don't totally understand everything that's being spoken about, but then you still make these connections to tell yourself a story that tries to make sense of it."

As such, Devlin's answer to his big question doesn't easily fit into a neat mythological box. Its corporeal form is something between a ghost and a witch, but pinning down its exact nature was less important than the metaphorical implications of a child facing down inexplicable horrors.

"I feel like we were pretty subtle. We don't spell things out completely in terms of what literally happens, and you get it through implication by capturing that feeling of unease that's present in a lot of my favorite movies," he says, gesturing at the *Blue Velvet* poster on his wall. David Lynch's warped vision of Americana especially lingers over *Cobweb*, a story that unfolds in a picturesque small town hoarding a secret, sordid history. Fittingly, Devlin also looked to his childhood for inspiration here. "I'm from Pennsylvania and that's where the movie is subtly set," he reveals. "I've felt that Pennsylvania has a very specific darkness underneath the surface that feels very old world, like just something is ingrained in the soil. It feels haunted."

Lynch's seminal neo-noir was one of many eclectic influences on *Cobweb*, which range from literary staples like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Raven" to a Halloween episode of *Family Matters* where the Winslows are terrorized by "Stevil," a relentless killer Urkel doll. Devlin laughs at that revelation but insists that these subconscious influences are embedded in his sensibilities as a screenwriter. "The things that terrified me as a kid were just the dumbest stuff in the world," he admits. "But, again, *Cobweb* is very much written and created from that childhood perspective of what terrifies you."

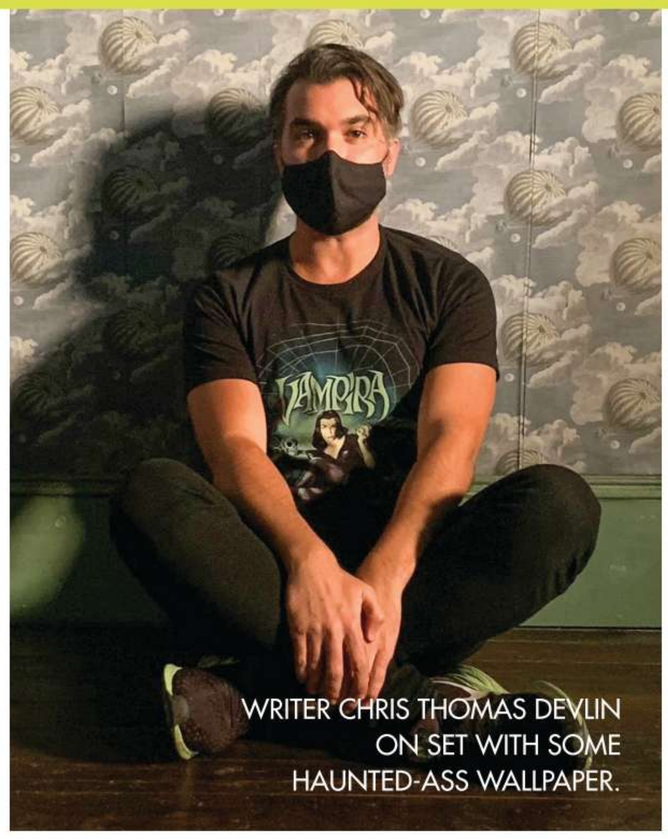


THE WEEK WE'RE WRITING THIS CAPTION, THIS PHOTO OF LIZZY CAPLAN AS CAROL SCARED THE ABSOLUTE BEJEEZUS OUT OF HORROR TWITTER.

"I wanted to capture that very specific feeling of being a kid and hearing something in the dark in your bedroom.

- Chris Thomas Devlin

Devlin also acknowledges more influential films, particularly other disturbing childhood tales. "*Paper House*, *Celia*, *The Reflecting Skin*, those surreal movies told from a child's perspective." He's especially drawn to the way these films imagine the terrifying dynamic that sometimes emerges between children and their parents and twists them into horror stories. "What's going on in the adult world takes a supernatural kind of menace to them," he offers before musing on one of his biggest influences: Val Lewton, whose work was "hugely inspirational" on *Cobweb*. He cites *The Curse of the Cat People* as the biggest influence but also praises the delicately orchestrated scares in other Lewton productions like *The Leopard Man*. "I have so much affection for Lewton's movies — they're just the best."



WRITER CHRIS THOMAS DEVLIN ON SET WITH SOME HAUNTED-ASS WALLPAPER.

Lewton's influence is especially evident in the bizarre relationship that unfolds within Peter's house. Like Ann Carter's Amy in *Curse of the Cat People*, Peter finds solace in what seems to be an imaginary friend. Unfortunately, his parents don't dismiss it as the stuff of

PHOTOS BY VLAD CIOPLEA / COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

childhood imagination and respond with an unsettling caginess that metastasizes into full-blown abuse involving a hidden cellar. Devlin acknowledges that *Cobweb* lingers in some dark spaces but credits stars Caplan and Starr for recognizing the playfulness lurking beneath the surface. "They're the spoonful of sugar," he raves. "If they weren't so arch, it might be a little bit harder to stomach. I love watching their performances. They're wild, and the choices they're making are just so fun and compelling."

Devlin is also quick to praise director Samuel Bodin and his other collaborators for bringing his "odd duck" script to life. "Stylistically, I wrote it almost like a poem to convey the atmosphere I was going for," he explains before complimenting the film's production design and art direction. He's especially pleased with the Halloween setting that he considers to be a key to the mood. "I love Halloween. It's aesthetically appealing and immediately adds to any story if you can set it at a time when there's a lot of ritual and decorations," he says. "Also, pumpkins are just fun!"

Throughout our chat, Devlin expresses gratitude for the collaborative nature of the shoot, which allowed him to play a role throughout the production. "I was really blessed," he says. "I was heavily involved and was consulted consistently throughout, even in post-production, and I was on-set. We were all on the same page, wanting to make a really cool, unique horror movie that didn't feel like all the other horror movies coming out and have something with a distinct flavor." However, his involvement didn't diminish the awe he felt when he saw his script coming to life before his eyes. "Being in a sound stage where they've constructed the house, walking the geography and seeing the wallpaper was incredible — it was truly the closest I'll ever be to true magic."

When he wrote *Cobweb* in 2018, Devlin never imagined he'd actually be on the set. "This is a script that I never had any expectation of selling — it was supposed to be a writing sample to remind people that I existed," he recounts, revealing the non-linear path that a screenwriting career often takes. While Devlin's journey thus far boasts the breakthrough success of 2022's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* ("If you would've told me at 13 years old that would be my first produced credit, I would've absolutely lost my shit," he marvels), it came after several years of writing while working as an assistant at a small production company. His story is a familiar one in a field that often involves writing simply to maintain visibility (he notes that his first Black List script, *The Wretched Emily Derringer*, didn't earn him a cent), making actual compensation all the more important when a script is sold, a thought that was on Devlin's mind in light of the recent WGA strike: "Writing is the best thing in the world, but it is a job and it's one that we're currently striking about." However, Devlin also believes this struggle for fair compensation isn't exclusive to his trade. "The things that we're fighting for now are things that are important to every industry," he insists. "It's not writers versus coal miners, it's writers versus Wall Street and Big Tech. And it's the same fight that everyone should be having." 💀

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The Novel Approach

THE NIGHTMARE NOVELIZATION UNEARTHS SCENES THAT NEVER MADE IT TO THE SCREEN.

The year 1979 was a seminal one for me as a horror fan and collector. It was the year I saw my first R-rated fright film in a theater (*Phantasm*), when I received the initial issue in my subscription to a brand new magazine called FANGORIA, and when I began clipping and saving newspaper advertisements for scary movies. It was also when I started picking up paperback novelizations of genre features, both those I had seen (*Alien*, *Halloween*) and those I couldn't, just yet (*Dawn of the Dead*).

Novelizations were both the ultimate memento of the filmgoing experience and, often, a reasonable substitute for it. They allowed the opportunity to relive the big-screen thrills and chills, or to experience, in prose form, those that were out of reach. Sometimes the latter was due to age restrictions, as in the case of *Dawn*, and sometimes it was because the movies never saw significant distribution, like John Huston's *Phobia*. And sometimes there were cases where, due to the vagaries of distribution, a novelization would hit bookstores well before the film it adapted saw release. That could result in spoilers (which happened with big pictures too; the most famous case was Donald F. Glut's adaptation of *The Empire Strikes Back*, which revealed the secret of Luke Skywalker's parentage a month before the movie came out). And occasionally, it created disappointment; after reading Charles E. Sellier Jr. and Robert Weverka's *The Boogens*, evidently based on an early script draft, I was disheartened when the flick itself proved to have a more simplistic plot and far less scary monsters.

It also happened that in '79, I went on a summer vacation with my family to England, where I discovered the existence of novelizations unique to that country. Titles like Leo Callan's *Piranha* and Phil Smith's *The Incredible Melting Man* seemed exotic to my burgeoning collector self, and I snapped them up. As I continued to build my library, I reveled in the joy of finding new additions in far-flung or unexpected places. During a trip to the Southwest, on a barely stocked book rack in a tiny motel gift shop, I was very happily startled to discover a copy of Peter Crowcroft's *Monster*, which is even more obscure than the cheeseball movie on which it's based. On a college excursion to Boston, I was told of a bookstore called Avenue Victor Hugo that had a good supply of movie tie-in softcovers, and it turned out to have a whole wall of 'em, fully alphabetized to boot. I came away from that one with about a dozen new additions, and returned whenever I went back to Beantown for years afterward. (Rent increases forced Avenue Victor Hugo's closure in 2004, but it reopened in 2018 in Lee, New Hampshire, and I hope to check out the new location soon.)

With the coming of the Internet and sites like AbeBooks.com and Bookfinder.com, tracking down novelizations became quite a bit easier, but also, inevitably, a little less fun than hunting them in the wild. Well before that, by the end of the 1980s, the proliferation of home video rendered one of the key appeals of these books obsolete; there was less need for prose translations when you could enjoy the movies themselves again at home. In the 2000s, existing horror novels reissued to tie in with their cinematic counterparts could still be found, but books based on new fright flicks became few and far between.

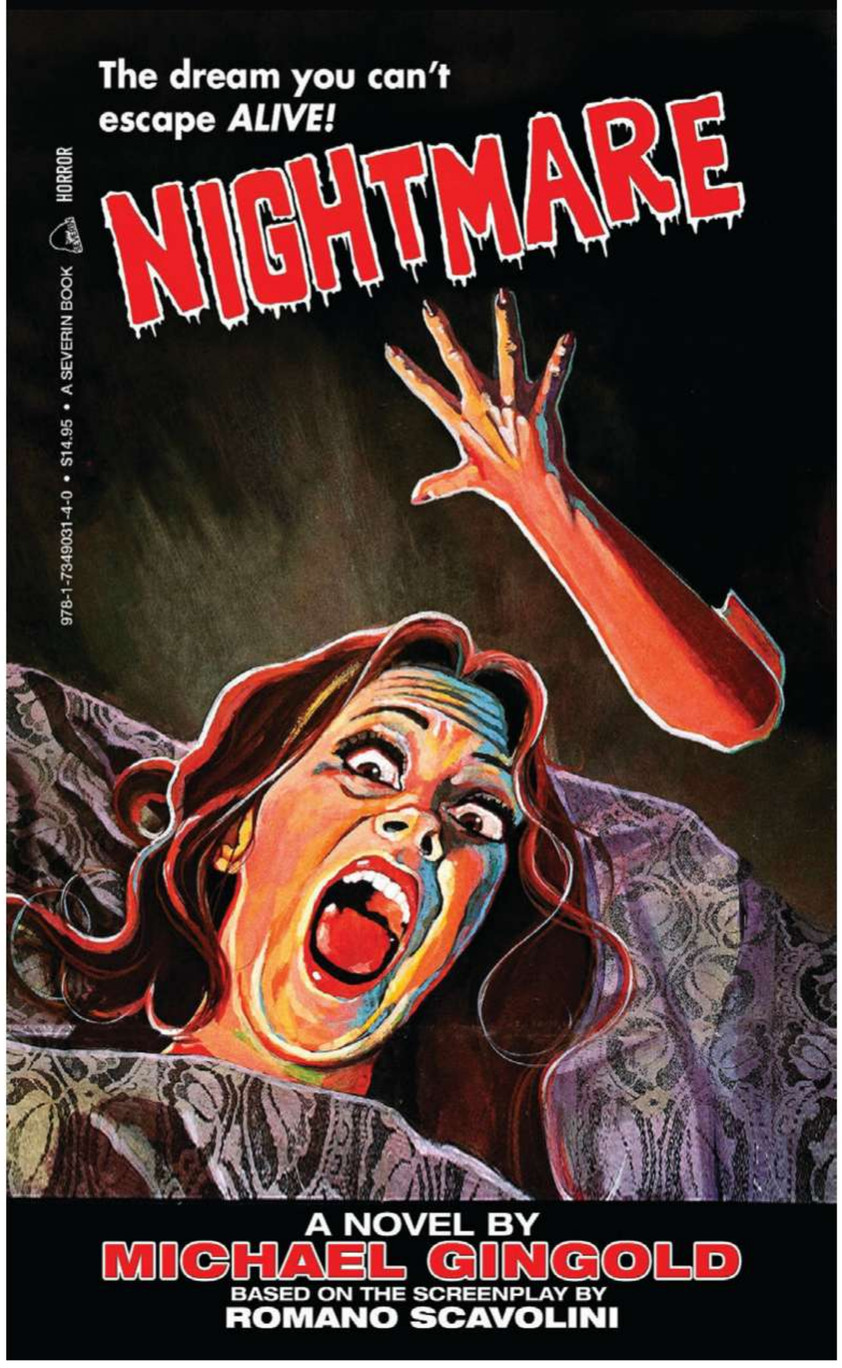
And yet, just as vinyl and VHS made comebacks in the last decade or so, genre novelizations have seen something of a rebirth as nostalgia pieces recently (perhaps an offshoot of the enthusiasm sparked by Grady Hendrix's *Paperbacks from Hell*). In 2020, Mark Alan Miller's Encyclopocalypse outfit, which had previously specialized in audio editions of fright and fantasy literature, began reissuing out-of-print books like John Skipp and Craig Spector's *Fright Night* and Jeff Rovin's *Re-Animator* while also launching a line of new novelizations of the likes of *Wishmaster*, *Creature* (a.k.a. *Titan Find*), and *Vamp* (all by Christian Francis), *Scared to Death* (by Matt Serafini), and even *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!* (by Jeff Strand). Digging even deeper, Blu-ray producer/distributor Severin Films started putting out paperback counterparts to occasional disc releases such as *Cruel Jaws*, *Night of the Demon*, and *Mardi Gras Massacre*, all novelized by Brad Carter.

And thanks to Severin — after many years as part of the Fango team and assembling my horror-ads collection in the *Ad Nauseam* books — I was able to bring another

enthusiasm born in '79 full circle this year by writing my first novelization.

The movie was Romano Scavolini's *Nightmare*, the gorefest that may still be best known for the did-Tom-Savini-do-it-or-didn't-he? question that swirled around it since its first release in 1981. Following the publication of *Cruel Jaws*, I asked Severin head honcho David Gregory if I could throw my hat into the ring to write one of their future books, and he ultimately offered me *Nightmare*, for which I was also just starting to work on bonus features for the Blu-ray release.

Once I got the gig, a copy of Scavolini's screenplay wasn't available, so my first step was to create a written translation of the film, with all the dialogue and basic action. That came out to about 60 pages, so there was plenty of room for embellishment, and one area that required additional material proved to be something of a surprise. *Nightmare*'s rep as an over-the-top bloodbath is earned, but it's largely the result of numerous bad-dream flashbacks by its central psychopath George Tatum (Baird Stafford) to his murder of his parents when he was a child. Shots of his mother's post-decapitation neck stump gushing red and his father's gore splattering the walls are repeated over and over again in the film, but there are only a handful of killings in its actual storyline, and a couple are largely offscreen. So I decided to add a few to up the book's horror content.



(Before we go on, a note about that female flashback victim. Many reviews and write-ups of *Nightmare* refer to her as a lover of George's dad, but the end credits specifically identify her as George's mother, so that's what I went with.)

The added death setpieces gave me the chance to create new characters, and the challenge of establishing who they are and building sympathy for them within a few pages while making their demises as tragic and horrifying as possible. I also enjoyed coming up with the settings; since George prowls 42nd Street at one point in the movie, I knew he had to claim a victim in the bowels of a grindhouse on The Deuce. Once the action switches to Florida, I figured it would be fun to set one of these scenes at a drive-in. But when I researched theaters at the time and area of the Sunshine State when and where *Nightmare* was filmed, I discovered that Cocoa Beach was home to one of the U.S.'s very first drafthouse-style cinemas, years before a certain Texas-based chain was launched, and knew I had to get that into my adaptation.

Cues for more additional material came with the large stockpile of photos David provided me for use in the Blu-ray extras. Among them were images from a few scenes that were filmed but not used in the final movie, one of which (George on a Florida beach at night, being freaked out by a rocket launch from nearby Cape Canaveral) is also described by producer William Milling in a supplemental interview. Figuring out where they went in the narrative, I reinserted these moments in the novelization, where they add extra drama and tension to the proceedings.

The rest was fleshing out the film's principal players, getting into their heads, adding a few details about the experimental drug program George is part of and the people behind it, and dropping in bits of humor where I could. (Among other things, I was able to riff on a blooper in which computer-screen text includes the misspelling "SCHIZOPHERNIA.") At this writing, the book was scheduled to come out alongside the Blu-ray in late June, and I hope *Nightmare* and novelization fans enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. 💀

THE PRINTED PAGE ALLOWS *NIGHTMARE* VICTIMS LIKE THIS GUY TO SUFFER A LITTLE LONGER.

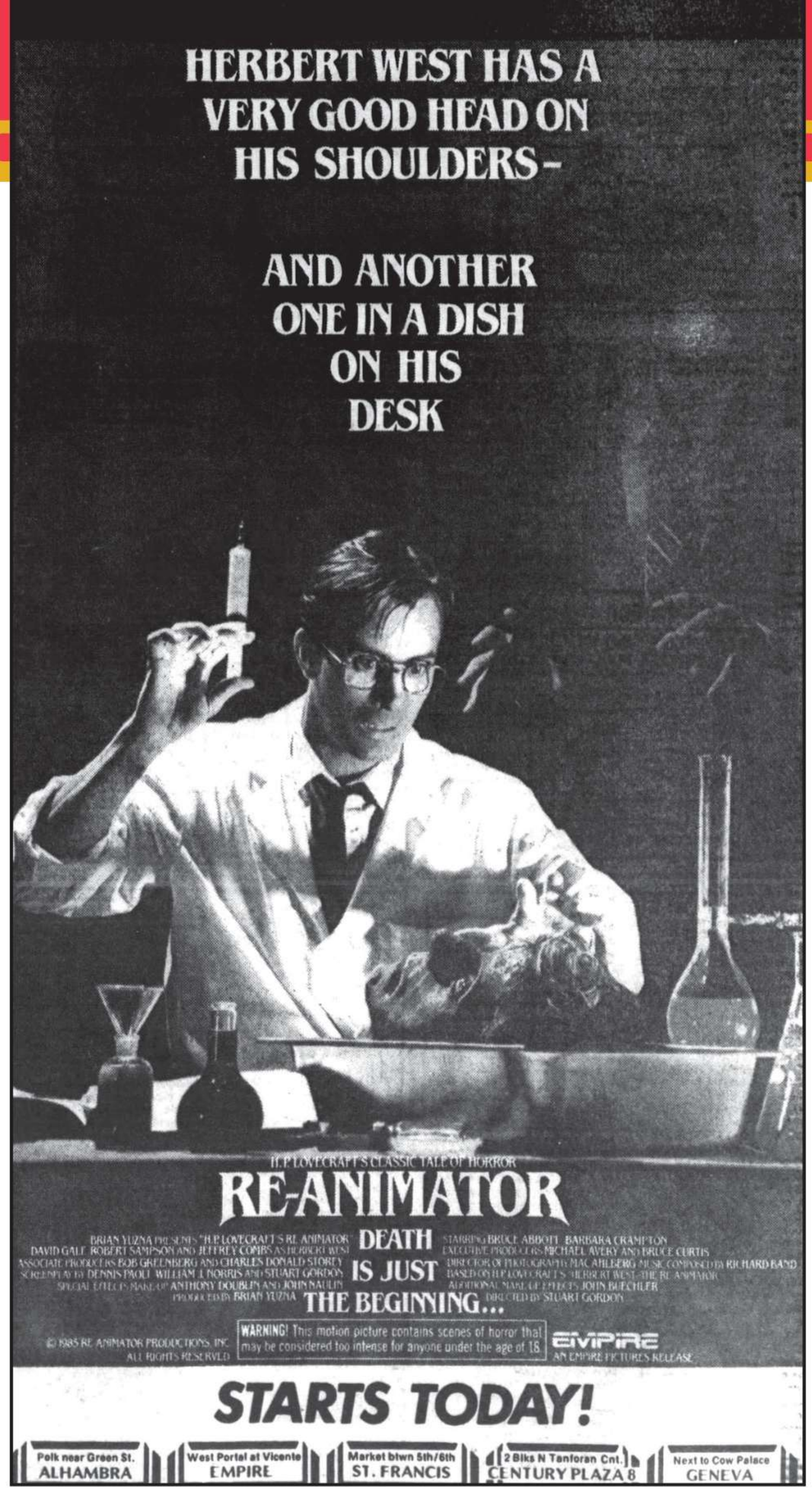
SceneQueen

LET'S ALL GO TO THE MOVIES

ON THE VALUE OF THE THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE AGE OF STREAMING.

BY BARBARA CRAMPTON

I sat in a packed theater at London's FrightFest in 2017 watching a screening of Demián Rugna's *Terrified*. My friend Jennifer, an interior designer, accompanied me on my trip, wanting mostly to take in the sights of the city and peruse shops of local antiquities. I urged her to join me, however, to watch *Terrified*, which had garnered a lot of buzz. "It's supposed to be really scary," I exclaimed with utter glee from our seats. "I'm so excited!" Jenn was wary but she's a good sport and always up for adventure. We laughed a bit during the opening credits, me with excitement and her with a combination of dread and uncertainty.


HERBERT WEST HAS A VERY GOOD HEAD ON HIS SHOULDERS -
AND ANOTHER ONE IN A DISH ON HIS DESK
H.P. LOVECRAFT'S CLASSIC TALE OF HORROR
RE-ANIMATOR
DEATH IS JUST THE BEGINNING...
WARNING! This motion picture contains scenes of horror that may be considered too intense for anyone under the age of 18.
STARTS TODAY!
Polk near Green St. ALHAMBRA
West Portal at Vicente EMPIRE
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2 Blks N Tanforan Cnt. CENTURY PLAZA 8
Next to Cow Palace GENEVA

I have to admit something here: I get scared in horror movies. Like, really scared. I've seen a lot of genre films and have been in quite a few, but my fear response is as strong as it's ever been. I still get nightmares thinking back to the SFX gag in *Re-Animator* that involved my holding a cow's eye. And as an audience member, I yelp often, my heart races, and many times I have to cover my eyes and peek through my fingers. During this screening of *Terrified*, I grabbed horror newbie Jenn's arm numerous times, squealing and squirming. The sight of the charred, lifeless boy sitting at the table was unnerving enough, and then when it moved slightly, I nearly left my seat for the small comfort of the lit ladies room.

Do I have the same reactions at home? Not even close. Yes, I watched many movies during lockdown, lying in the soft solitude of my bed, and I still do enjoy streaming some of my favorite films repeatedly at home. But the communal event of sitting with friends and strangers in a darkened theater can't be beat. I want to dwell in the combined visceral response of a live experience.

It feels like seeing movies theatrically is making a comeback. Streaming companies have slowed down (for now) in buying and making new films. People all over the globe have largely gone back outside their homes after the height of quarantine and want to be active again. Just this year, I saw *Smile*, *Barbarian* and *Evil Dead Rise* in the church of cinema – the theater. I felt like I was home.

Plus, cool things happen in theaters. In Los Angeles I attended a screening of *Smile* as part of Beyond Fest. The director, Parker Finn, shot a tee-shirt out of a cannon into the audience and I caught it! I was so excited. The only shirt being thrown at me at home… is one to wash.

I've been wondering a lot about the future of moviegoing over the tumultuous past couple of years. I decided to ask an expert. I spoke to Dylan Marchetti of Variance Films, a company that helps execute traditional platform releases, one-night national event screenings, tours, qualifying runs and day/date releases. Variance was responsible for booking many screenings of the phenomenal *RRR*, *Drive My Car* and *Decision to Leave*, for instance.

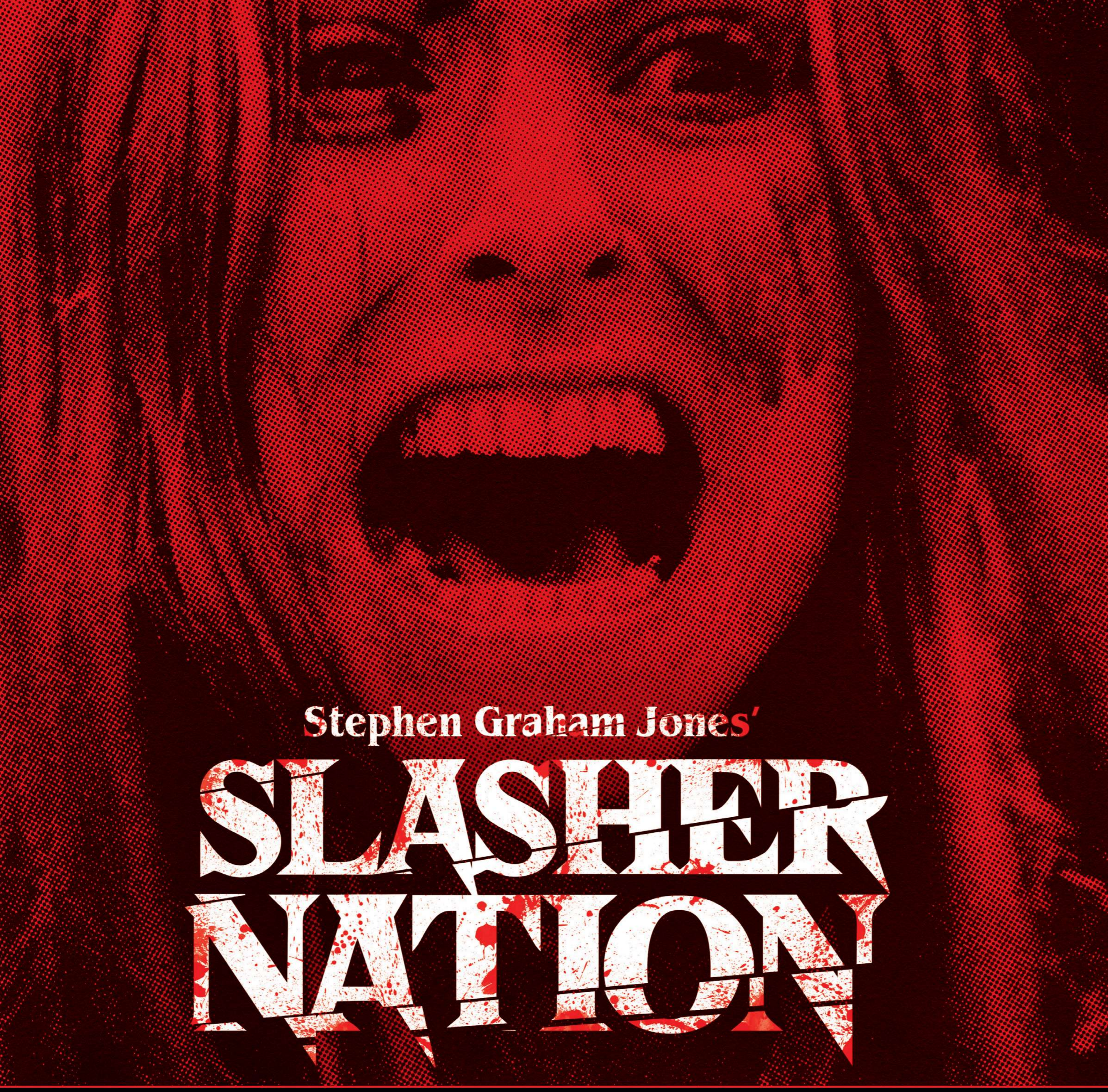
I asked Dylan if he thought people would be returning to the theatrical experience in a big way as life approaches a return to normalcy. We talked about how robustly streamers went at turning out new movies, with releases coming so fast over the last couple of years that it was difficult to keep up. I personally felt overwhelmed with the wealth of releases, each one almost canceling out the last with so many new offerings back-to-back.

Dylan said, upfront, that he wants more people to return to a live experience. Of course, "I'm biased!" he exclaimed. "I only do theatrical. The studios drive how films are released. During the pandemic there was a bit of experimentation; it wasn't safe to go to the theater. Now that's changed and people do want to go out to see a movie." He added, however, "that older people used to support the arthouse crowd experience, but they've been the last to come back. Young people do want that crowd experience and business is in much better shape and looks optimistic for the future."

And there's the matter of timing. Does anyone recall *King Knight*, *Superhost*, *Alone With You*? These are just a few of my recent films which felt like they came and went with a whimper and little fanfare. Did studios do an injustice to these smaller movies by releasing hundreds of them each month online in an endless pool of titles? *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond* played theaters for a few months while word of mouth caught on and more people bought tickets. They became cult classics because they had time to breathe, so audiences could seek them out.

Dylan waxed nostalgic about those days. And he points out that, "Being in a theater is like plugging your emotions into an amplifier. It's emotional, and I like the feeling of group hysteria. This is what you miss watching a scary movie at home. This communal experience, I think, makes one feel things more deeply. We can be swept away with others in a theater: more hypnotized, more scared, feeling more together than alone."

So come on, everybody! Get up off your couch and go to the nearest cinema with your friends. I'll meet you there; order me a large popcorn with extra butter… 💀



A FINAL GIRL IS BORN

The final girl is to the slasher as silver bullets are to the werewolf, as daylight is to the vampire, as head shots are to the zombie. She's the antidote, the slasher's opposite, nature's cap to this cycle of violence, the genre's built-in way of containing the bodycount. In the justice fantasy of the slasher, the final girl is the gritty realness that finally... if not "grounds" these over-the-top events, then brings them all to the ground, anyway. Temporarily, sure, but such is the nature of the market, and franchises, and slashers themselves: you can't keep a good one down.

We'd have it no other way.

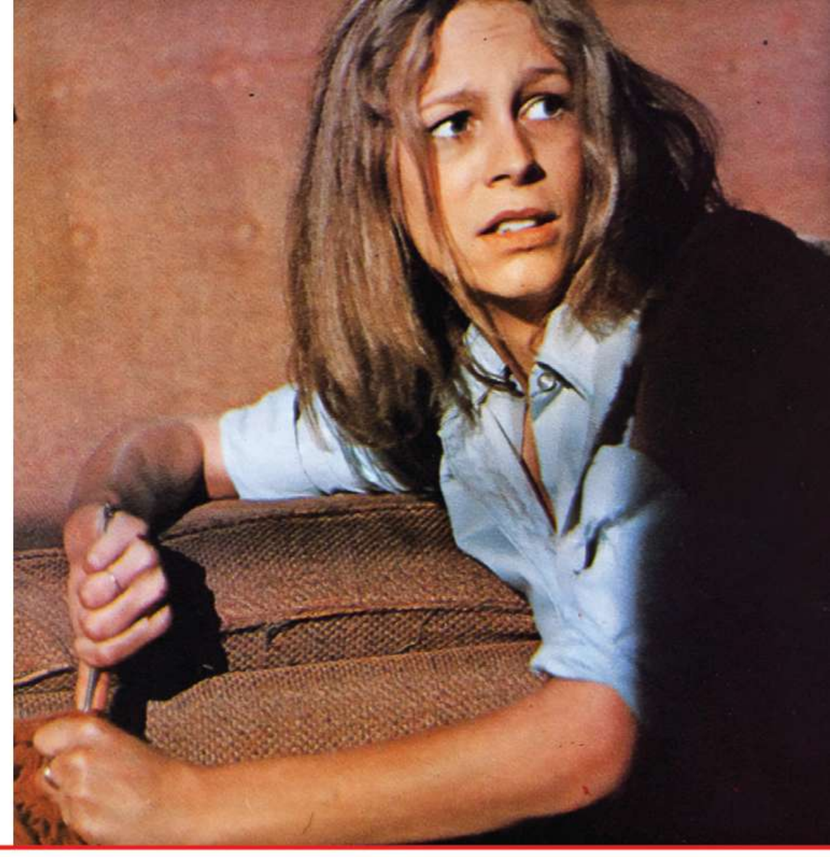
But where does the final girl come into this long, bloody history? Did she spring fully formed from the forehead of *Halloween*? Has she been with us since *Dracula*? Is she the volatile product of an unholy union between Beowulf and Joan of Arc? If so, did Hitchcock midwife that delivery?

Looking at her through the years might help.

Before there were final girls, there were scream queens, and before the scream queen there was the damsel in distress. The damsel in distress was the (white) woman in the horror story who's pretty much an object being pulled apart in a tug of war between the hero and the villain. Her function in the story is to cringe away from evil, and then wait to be saved. You can see her in high resolution in the early westerns, where she often ends up tied to some train tracks.

She always gets saved from the machinations of the black hats, but still, she dies out all the same, probably right about the time the talkies get going, which is when her character needed to communicate with her voice, not just her terrified eyes.

Enter the scream queen, perhaps typified best by Fay Wray in 1933's *King Kong*. The audiences loved the scream queen. Still expressing the characteristics of her progenitor, the damsel in distress, she gets snatched away like the object she still is, but the black hat she's now in the clutches of started tending toward the monstrous. From giant apes to creatures from various lagoons, the antagonists of these stories were less strategic, more just arbitrarily violent and destructive, and the scream queen's main function is to – you guessed it – *scream*, which serves to alert both the audience and the story's hero to the heightened danger.



Without the damsel in distress becoming the scream queen and then spending that vital decade or so in the giallo, we never get Laurie Strode, Nancy Thompson or Sidney Prescott, do we?

To be sure, though, the scream queen may try to wriggle away, as any of us would, and her screaming may alert the heroes to the location of this monster, but she doesn't actually fight it herself. She's still a very thinly drawn character, a type more than a person. Look at Marion Crane in *Psycho*, right? For as much time as we spend with her, all she finally does is dramatize the monstrousness going on at this Bates Motel, and, by 1960, her scream isn't even heard by the story's heroes. Rather, it's her absence that alerts them to the danger.

EVOLUTION OF A FINAL GIRL: FAY WRAY IN *KING KONG;*
MARILYN BURNS IN *THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE* (FACING);
LAURIE STRODE IN *HALLOWEEN* (ABOVE).
(MEANWHILE, BILLY FROM *BLACK CHRISTMAS* EYEBALLS HIS SPECIAL GAL.)

I submit that her absence is due, in broad strokes, to having been smuggled overseas, to feature in giallo after giallo, which, I believe, is Italian for "incubation chamber." At least it was for the scream queen.

In the giallo, this damsel-with-a-voice is stalked and assaulted by so many black-glove killers that, finally, frustrated with just being an object, she started turning around and *fighting*. Granted, these black-glove killers weren't quite the slasher we know and love, but, all the same, being blade-wielding killers with whom no negotiation was possible, the scream queen, just to survive, began accruing more and more of the characteristics we now associate with the final girl: resilience, vigilance, a fierce intelligence, and – perhaps most vital – an insistence on her own right to live.

Without the damsel in distress becoming the scream queen and then spending that vital decade or so in the giallo, we never get Laurie Strode, Nancy Thompson or Sidney Prescott, do we? You can still see all her previous incarnations in those characters, though: final girls still cringe away from evil, they scream and then scream again, and they run and run until they finally turn and face the monster.

So, then, is the final girl born onscreen in 1978, with *Halloween*? That is where the tropes and conventions swirling around do finally get codified into something like a formula, which can then be repeated all through the Golden Age of the slasher, and beyond. Or? Did the final girl wash back up on American shores after her time in Italy, and *then* get plugged into the slasher?

If the latter – and I think it is the latter – then we're looking pre–1978. Specifically, we're probably looking to Sally Hardesty in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. And, yes, some do call that film a slasher. It's got a lot of the standard characteristics, doesn't it? A mask, that iconic weapon, gore, stalking, enough isolation that a massacre like this can happen, and, of course, a van load of carving dummies. And? Whether *Chain Saw* is a slasher or a cannibal story finally doesn't matter that much, so long as we can agree that trying to form a

Final girls are our champions, our defenders, a model we should all strive to be.

cool kids' club with stringent entrance requirements isn't good for horror, as it traffics in the kind of exclusivity that can leave people, and films, out in the cold, since they suddenly don't "qualify."

Horror's a lot more inclusive than that, isn't it? If we're to be a genre that instructs people how to push back against bullies, how to persist in the face of all odds, and to see the light at the end of life's long dark tunnels, then... it's best to not build walls keeping people, and their stories, out.

So, *Chain Saw* is or isn't a slasher, who cares.

But I definitely think Sally Hardesty is a final girl. Just, one who stepped into that camera eye fully formed, while her eventual opposite, her own personal monster the slasher, was still pulling itself together, thinking its approach through, and trying to figure its look out, maybe even scry into its eventual motivation.

By 1978, that would all get locked in by John Carpenter and Debra Hill, and wonderfully so.

Until then, though, we had Sally Hardesty to show how hard a person can fight when dropped into a situation like this. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, we see a character start out "shallow," and then, by processing through this horror ordeal, gain some depth-of-character. Sally Hardesty does get abducted like a damsel, and she does scream like Fay Wray, but, importantly, she runs like the last girl in a giallo, doesn't she? Which is to say, she's not waiting for the hero to save her – she is the hero. She's saving herself here, doesn't need anybody clomping in on a white horse, thanks.

However, just two months before *The Texas Chain Saw* tore the world's door open and made us *all* run, *Black Christmas* hit the theaters. I'm talking Jess Bradford, who was very much ahead of her time, final girl-wise. Resilient, vigilant, insisting on her own life, but – seven years before Ginny would weaponize her psychology training against Jason, ten years before Nancy Thompson would out-think Freddy – Jess isn't relying on muscles or weapons to win the day. She's relying on her *mind*. *Black Christmas* finally becomes a battle of wits, not strength or durability.

And, sure, Billy's deviousness does finally win the day, but, as *The Cabin in the Woods* works into the slasher bible, the final girl winning the day isn't actually necessary for this ritual to complete itself, is it?

So, Billy might not get put down at the end of the story, but neither does Jess. In the same way, two months later, both Sally and Leatherface would make it out alive, as well. Just like Laurie and Michael, right? Like Nancy and Freddy.

The slasher was figuring itself out, piecing itself together, becoming exactly what the eighties needed: a reminder that there's still danger lurking out there in the shadows of suburbia.

And the most vital... not "piece," that would revert the final girl back to an object, but the final *character* the slasher needed to complete itself was standing there at the edge of the light, her hands bloody from all her previous outings: the final girl.

I say she's the slasher's opposite, but, really, if she exists first, then it's the slasher who's *her* opposite, right? Putting her exactly where she should be: at the center of this dynamic, this story, this genre. And if we allow her to step out of that genre from time to time, then we also get to designate Ellen Ripley a final girl, don't we? And Erin from *You're Next*. Grace from *Ready or Not*. And if they're on your team, on the *final girl* team, then the darkness isn't quite as dark anymore, is it?

Final girls are our champions, our defenders, a model we should all strive to be. Like somebody I know said, they're the vessel we keep our hope in. And they're bad enough that they stand up against the badness wherever it shows up – no genre can contain her. 💀

SALLY, JESS AND LAURIE ALL STAY FOR THE END CREDITS.

TRUE BELIEVERS: MICHAEL AND DANNY PHILIPPOU BREAK THROUGH WITH TALK TO ME

BY ALEXANDRA HELLER-NICHOLAS

THE STAR AND DIRECTORS OF A24'S NEW POSSESSION FLICK SIT AROUND THE SÉANCE TABLE TO UNEARTH SOME SECRETS.

LEFT: MIA (SOPHIE WILDE) LOOKS LIKE SHE'S GOT SOMETHING TO SAY, ALL RIGHT.

RIGHT: HOW DO YOU DO? MIA (WILDE) SHAKES HANDS WITH DOOM.

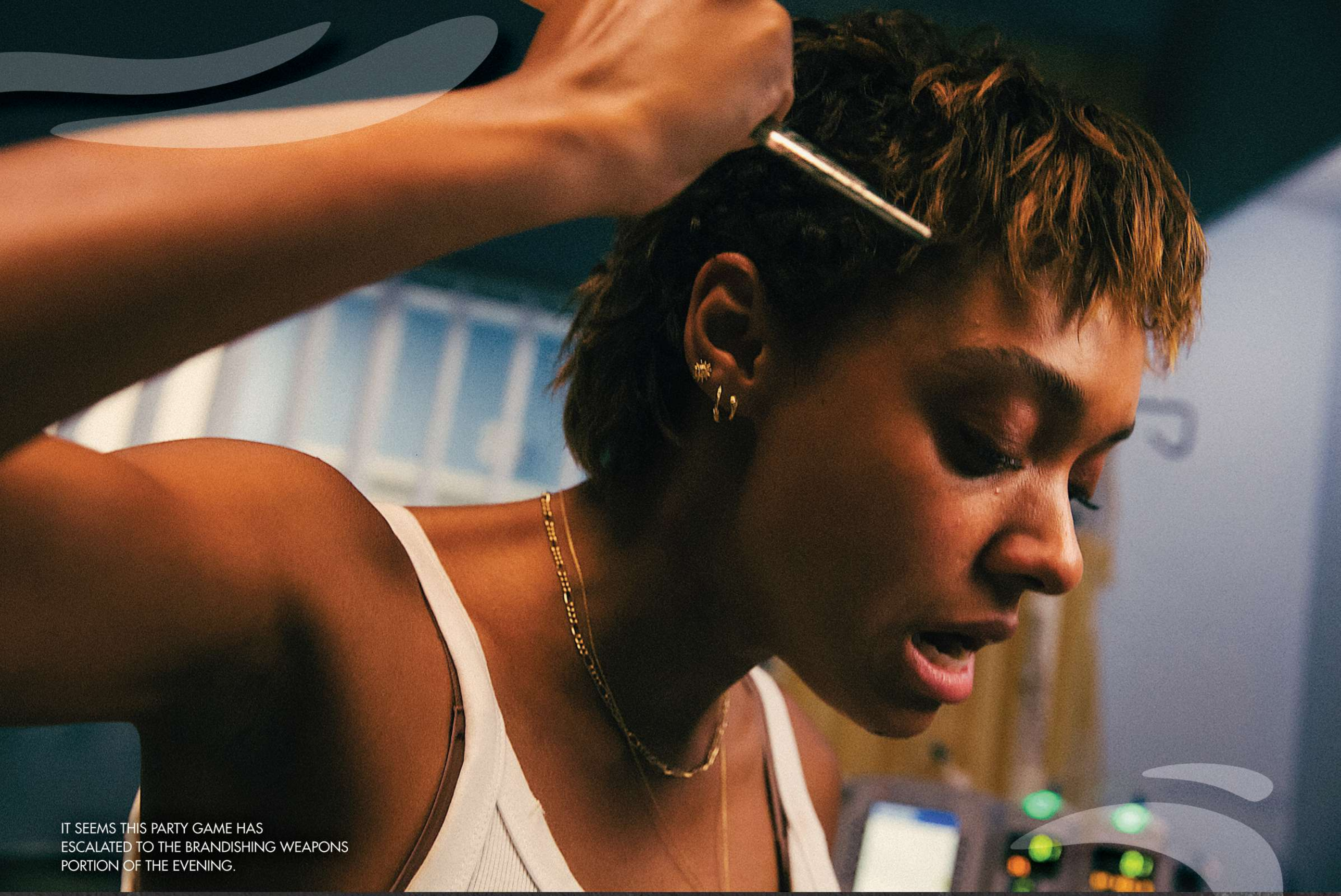
I'm talking to Sophie Wilde, star of the new horror film *Talk to Me*, about the breakout success of the film's directors, Danny and Michael Philippou. "C'mon," I prod her with a gentle conspiratorial whisper, "no way are they that pure." But Wilde does not hesitate. "They are genuinely that lovely and caring, and two of the most unhinged, energetic people you'll ever meet, but in the most beautiful, pure way," she says. "They are just genuinely so excited to be working and doing what they are doing, and so passionate and intelligent. I am besotted by them – I love them."

Wilde's story checks out. While I've spent only a little time with the brothers who have become 2023's hottest horror property, her praise feels less like PR hyperbole and closer to a simple statement of fact. The twins from the small, sleepy Australian city of Adelaide built their reputation on their wildly successful YouTube channel RackaRacka (over 6.7 million followers!), using that platform as an informal film school to experiment with special effects and stunts before turning their attention to feature filmmaking. The rest, as they say, is history.

Reflecting on how a small indie feature set in the Australian suburbs has somehow ended up as one of the biggest success stories out of this year's Sundance, the brothers emit an almost radioactive glow of excitement. Speaking of their first encounter with high-profile distributor A24 after their world premiere, Michael says, "We're like, 'Holy shit – we know who you guys are! You guys are the fuckin' best, *what the fuck*!'" Wilde was similarly awestruck: "As an actor, I have a little list – 'Sophie's Biggest Dreams' – and A24 were on there. It was incredibly surreal."

The film follows Wilde's character Mia, a high school student who has become an informal third child at her best friend Jade's (Alexandra Jensen)

IMAGES COURTESY OF A24



IT SEEMS THIS PARTY GAME HAS ESCALATED TO THE BRANDISHING WEAPONS PORTION OF THE EVENING.

house after the death of Mia's mother. While life with her dad Max (Marcus Johnson) is cold and awkward, Mia finds security, joy and companionship in Jade's house with her mom Sue (Miranda Otto) and little brother Riley (Joe Bird). Drawn to anything for a bit of excitement, Mia, Jade, Riley and Jade's boyfriend Daniel (Otis Dhanji) hang out with Hayley (Zoe Terakes) and Joss (Chris Alosio), who have a creepy ceramic hand that forms the center of the teens' current social media trend: strapped to a chair by your peers, you light a candle, hold the hand and say "talk to me," and for 90 seconds experience what is supposed to be a kind of possession by a random representative of the newly deceased. From tongue kissing dogs to speaking gibberish in strange, funny voices, what results is fuel for the social media fire as the kids video each other on their camera phones, creating easy fodder for a potential viral audience. The catch is, though, that you can only stay "under" for 90 seconds – any longer and you risk granting the visiting spirit permission for a more permanent stay. Throw into this mix young Riley's desperation to fit in with the cool older kids and what may or may not be the spirit of Mia's deceased mother, and you have all the ingredients for one of the year's biggest horror movies.

"LIFE ISN'T JUST ONE THING. IT'S NOT JUST ALWAYS SCARY; IN LIFE YOU HAVE FUNNY MOMENTS, SCARY MOMENTS, GENUINE MOMENTS, TENDER MOMENTS – THERE'S ALL THAT IN THE FILM." - MICHAEL PHILIPPOU

And yet, *Talk to Me* is so much more than the sum of its parts. As anyone who has seen the film will tell you, it's not so much the nuts-and-bolts elements of the storyline, or even the solid, convincing performances by Wilde and her co-stars, but an indefinable "something else," a kind of intangible, abstract energy that pulses through the film from its opening scene at a suburban house party where a previous participant of the "talk to me" game goes on a stabbing spree, to its final, intoxicatingly poetic moments where Mia's journey takes her to perhaps its logical conclusion.

What remains inescapable when watching the film is that the success of *Talk to Me* is much more than just good luck and fortunate timing. These guys *really* know their stuff. Danny and Michael weren't even 10 years old when a friend of their father's began taking them to see horror movies at the cinema, and the boys were hooked. Danny remembers that the first horror movie they saw at the cinema was 2003's *Freddy vs. Jason*, followed soon after by Marcus Nispel's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake. An obsession with horror was born, along with a broader cinephilia which introduced them to the works of filmmakers such as Bong Joon-ho.

IMAGES COURTESY OF A24

But their filmmaking experience long predates *Freddy vs. Jason*. As Michael notes, "We grew up with a massive group of friends around the same age and we would make movies together – we would copy things that we saw, things that we liked and were like 'How do they pull that off?'" He continues, "We'd do things with dolls like Chucky, we'd do *Evil Dead* stuff, *Saw*, things like that – we'd imitate it and copy it and do our versions of it, and I guess it just evolved over time into our own style." Danny jumps in: "We had a series from when we were about 10 or 12; they're all on VHS, but we had a series called the 'Evil Flamingo,' I guess our version of Chucky, where we had a flamingo go around and kill all our friends and there'd be all these over-the-top, black and white, tomato sauce kills."

Their horror filmmaking background doesn't end there. Eager to have on-set experience, Michael recalls seeking out locally produced horror productions on his own to see first-hand how movies were made. While other Adelaide-made horror productions such as Ursula Dabrowsky's 2014 film *Inner Demons* are notable additions to his pre-*Talk to Me* filmography, if one movie stands out it is surely his and Danny's work on Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*. "I used to volunteer to be on films before we did our YouTube stuff," Michael explains. "We were doing a media course, and I wanted to just be on set and see that it was a real job, because it didn't feel like a real thing, really, to pursue film, so I would volunteer on things for free." He continues, "A producer, Julie Byrne, who was working on *The Babadook*, says, 'You can't keep doing these jobs for free.' But I just wanted to be on set. I got so much from it." Byrne came through, and Michael got his first paid film credit for a role that included driving director Jennifer Kent and the film's star Essie Davis around Adelaide.

Through Michael, Danny was also involved with *The Babadook*, and he is unambiguous about the influence that Kent had on them. "It was the first director on a set that we worked on that really cared – she was so passionate, and she was so obsessive, and you could tell she was an artist at work and that she loved the project and the material." Michael adds, "It was great to see – this feels different, this doesn't feel just like a job to her. It's her life, and she lives and breathes this story."

Yet while Michael and Danny grew up with horror in their veins, Wilde has a different background with the genre. "I literally can't do horror," she confesses. "*I can't do it* – I feel like I have such an overactive imagination that if I watch horror I will be traumatized for months. So I've always loved it, but been very afraid to engage with it." But the unexpected horror star of 2023 still sees a logic behind how she brought a character so core to *Talk to Me* to life: "I don't know if I necessarily saw myself as being a scream queen, but there is something about it that excited me about demystifying the genre by getting into the genre."

This process of demystifying horror – of stripping away the surface elements to get to the heart of what lies underneath – perhaps offers the key to what makes Wilde's performance such an essential element of the film. "When I first read the screenplay, it felt to me

RILEY (JOE BIRD) TRIES HIS HAND AT THE HAND.

THESE KIDS TODAY, WITH THEIR CELL PHONES AND THEIR UNDERAGE DRINKING AND THEIR EMBALMED EXTREMITIES.

like it was really a kind of meditation on mental health and grief, and so in some ways I feel like a lot of Mia is a lot of me," she says. "I remember reading it and thinking, 'I know who this person is.' So I guess a lot of it was relating it to my own experiences. That feeling of isolation, of losing someone close to you, is so universal, that it felt almost easy to play."

It is precisely this sense of authenticity that permeates *Talk to Me* on an almost molecular level, elevating it above the more familiar genre fare that relies on horror's recognizable codes and conventions. Reflecting on her work with Michael and Danny, Wilde notes, "I think that's what they are so great at doing, capturing real life dialogue and the way that young people speak. So often I watch things portraying teenagers and I'm like, 'Really? Hmmm?' But they've managed to make it so organic."

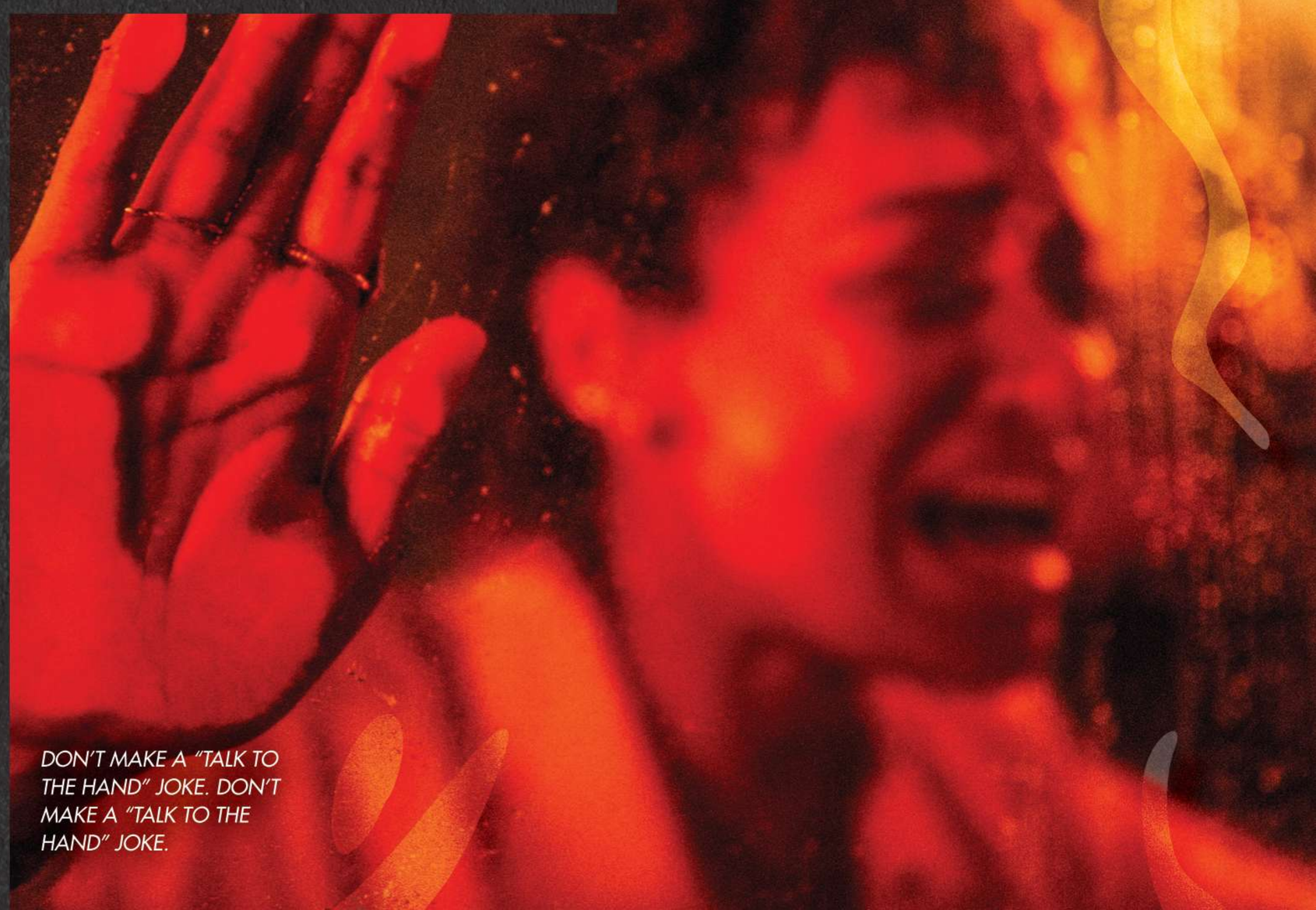
While Danny and Michael are quick to agree that authenticity was crucial to what they wanted to do with *Talk to Me*, they don't hesitate in turning their praise around back to Wilde and the rest of the cast. "The rehearsal period was such a big part of it," says Danny. "We would sit down with the cast and often they'd find their voices through their characters, going through the lines." He adds, "The cast were everything – we were so lucky with that cast – we can't praise them enough."

While the film broadly captures what feels like a genuine age-appropriate energy, what stands out are the relationships different characters have with Mia, particularly the banter that largely marks her relationship with her best friend, Jade. It's rare that a movie can capture the nuanced relationship between two women, let alone in a film with two male directors, and this was conscious. "Jade and Mia are loosely based on these sisters that when Danny was writing were teenage girls. These were family friends, and you just listen to them speak and the way they argue is very funny and unique and awesome, like a pool of energy that's amazing to listen to."

At first, the jump from the rowdy comedy splat-fest of their most famous YouTube videos to the comparatively somber world of *Talk to Me* might seem big, but this undermines the important comic beats of the latter that, again, add to its defining sense of authenticity. "Life isn't just one thing," says Michael. "It's not just always scary; in life you have funny moments, scary moments, genuine moments, tender moments – there's all that in the film." He continues, "The movies that we love are the ones that merge genres seamlessly. Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* is the perfect example; it's dark comedy, it's tense, it's funny, it's scary, and it bounces between these genres so elegantly and feels like one piece. That's what we wanted to do, that seamless genre hopping."

Add to that the human fascination with what lies beyond, and the Philippou brothers found the perfect combination. "We just learned that people are obsessed with horror and people are excited about horror," said Danny. "We've got this morbid obsession with all things scary, so we knew that what felt new and real for now is that people wouldn't entirely be scared of that stuff." He continues, "Like people doing a Ouija board for fun, that's how we treated the hand – everyone would have their phones and everyone would be talking about it, young people especially, so we just leant into that sort of energy." Michael notes, "In the old days it was like 'don't walk into the dark forest,' whereas now it's, 'Walk into the dark forest and film it.'"

Looking back on the humble origins of *Talk to Me*, Michael and Danny's journey was always one based in faith, a gut-level instinctive knowledge that this is what they were meant to do. "Who cares if we lose everything, because this is everything!" says Michael. "Fuck money! We don't care about money. We want to make the best movie possible – and that's what we've always wanted to do." 💀



DON'T MAKE A "TALK TO THE HAND" JOKE. DON'T MAKE A "TALK TO THE HAND" JOKE.

"TORTURE, INSANITY, & DESPERATION
DESIGNED FOR MAXIMUM DISCOMFORT"

- BLOODY DISGUSTING

BEAT

"GRABS A HOLD OF YOUR STILL BEATING HEART
& SLOWLY TEARS IT OUT"

- PHASR

TO

"A BLOODY THRILLER
THAT LIVES UP TO ITS DEPRAVED TITLE"

- DENNIS SCHWARTZ MOVIE REVIEWS

DEATH

"A NON-STOP NIGHTMARE WHERE
SKIN IS RIPPED, BONE IS SNAPPED,
AND SPIRITS ARE BROKEN"

- DREAD CENTRAL

THIS SUMMER

WELCOME VILLAIN FILMS

André Øvredal on

THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER

By Michael Gingold

TOP: NOSFERATU (JAVIER BOTET) AND CLEMENS (COREY HAWKINS) DO A LITTLE GILBERT & SULLIVAN FOR US.

BOTTOM: DIRECTOR ANDRÉ ØVREDAL SUMMONS THE SHADOWS FOR HIS NOSFERATU (BOTET).

The character of Dracula is immortal in two different ways. He is an undead creature living on through age after age, and he has been an undying source of inspiration for filmmakers and writers practically since Bram Stoker created him in 1897. He is perhaps the most malleable of all classic characters; where fans and purists will protest if some iconic figures are altered in new vehicles, Dracula has been embraced as a monster, a romantic figure, an object of fun, and everything in between.

There is one part of Stoker's original tale that was never fully dramatized until screenwriter Bragi F. Schut tackled it in the late 1990s, and the resulting script, *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*, proved as difficult to kill as Dracula himself. Schut based it on the seventh chapter of the epistolary novel, in which a character relates the arrival of the ship *Demeter* in Whitby, England, abandoned save for the captain, who is found dead with his hands lashed to the wheel. The captain's log is discovered, revealing how the crew disappeared or went mad and died due to the presence of "a man, tall and thin, and ghastly pale." Schut expanded this to reveal the details of what happens on the ship's doomed voyage from Carpathia to London, carrying a cargo of 50 unmarked wooden crates and one very hungry vampire.

The Last Voyage script was first acquired by Phoenix Pictures, with Robert Schwentke (*Flightplan*) announced to direct in 2003. From there, the project went on a development odyssey that saw filmmakers including Marcus Nispel (the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13th* remakes), Stefan Ruzowitzky (*Cold Hell*, the Oscar-winning *The Counterfeiters*), David Slade (*30 Days of Night*), and Neil Marshall (*The Descent*) attached over the years. It wasn't until 2019, though, that this ship finally set sail under Amblin Partners, with André Øvredal at the helm. The director of *Troll Hunter*, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* began filming in June 2021, guiding a cast headed by Corey Hawkins (*In the Heights*) as a doctor who joins the Demeter crew, *Game of Thrones*' Liam Cunningham and Aisling Franciosi as the captain and stowaway Anna, respectively, and David Dastmalchian (*Dune*) as the first mate, along with Jon Jon Briones, Stefan Kapičić (*Deadpool*), and Nikolai Nikolaeff. Dracula, presented here as a literal creature of the night, is portrayed by Javier Botet, who has terrorized audiences as everything from *[REC]*'s Medeiros girl to the titular ghoul in *Mama* to *Scary Stories*' "Big Toe" corpse.

Following *Scary Stories*, Øvredal had been attached to a film version of the Stephen King-as-Richard Bachman novel *The Long Walk* ("I'm not part of that anymore, unfortunately. It's one of my big regrets, because I loved that project, and I think it would have been an amazing movie") before coming aboard *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*. With the script credited to Schut and Zak Olkewicz (*Bullet Train*, *Fear Street: 1978*), the movie pulls into theatrical ports August 11 from Universal Pictures and DreamWorks Pictures. Here, Øvredal relates how he brought the long saga of this portion of Dracula's story to a close.

PHOTO LEFT BY RAINER BAJO / IMAGES COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT

TOP: A CLEAR, CLOSE-UP SHOT OF THE MONSTER? TAKE NOTE, OTHER PROMO TEAMS: THIS IS HOW YOU GET US TO WATCH YOUR MOVIE.

BOTTOM: OLGAREN (STEFAN KAPIČIĆ) IS GETTING A LITTLE HOT OVER THE COLLAR.

How much did you know about the long history of Last Voyage's script before you got involved?

I wasn't aware of that whole story. Obviously, the first conversation was, 'Yeah, we've been developing this for 20 years or so.' I Googled it as soon as I heard about it, and I saw that every director who's made a horror movie of any notoriety in Hollywood has been attached to it, and some wonderful actors. So it was amazing for that to land while I was there.

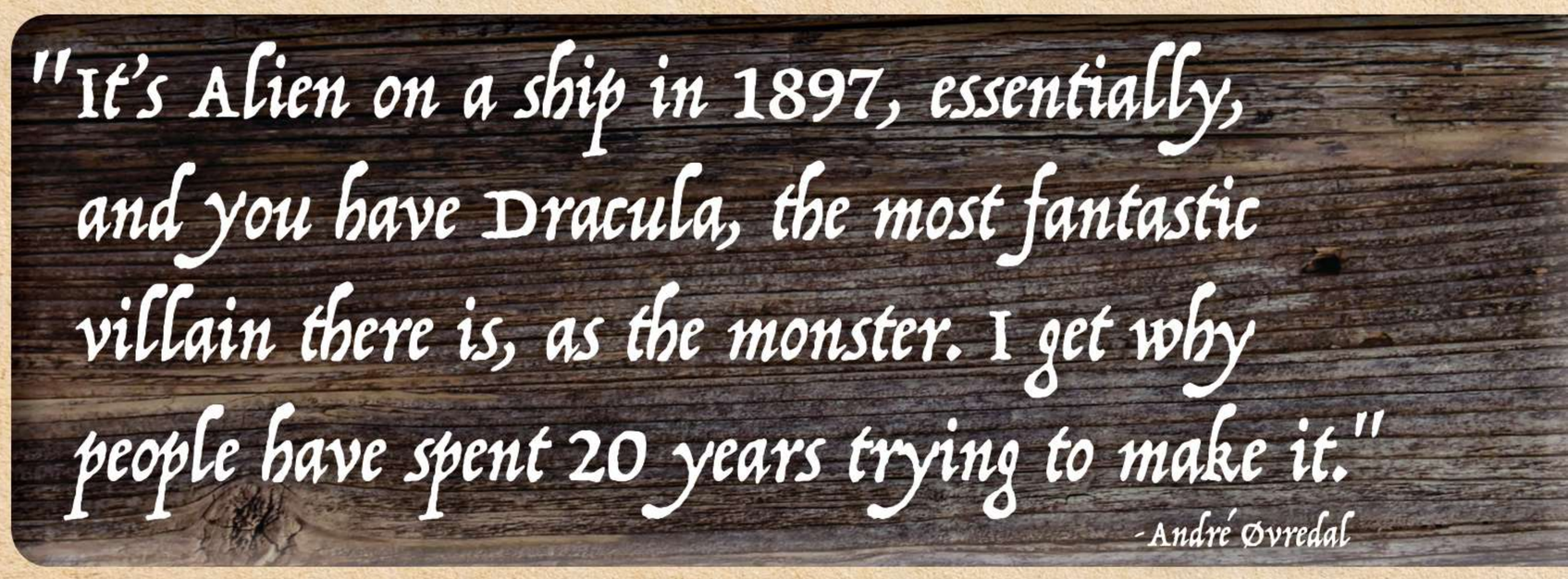
How did your scripting process work? Did you look at all the previous drafts, or did you go right back to Schut's original?

We had the latest draft they had worked on, and that was a great script. It's an amazing tale regardless of how you tweak it, in a way. I had certain ideas I wanted to work on, and Zak Olkewicz was chosen to help me do that because he had a great pitch regarding what could be achieved. We tweaked a couple of character things, and some other stuff that I considered important, but that the audience will never know [*laughs*]! We changed the character of Anna a bit; that was probably the biggest thing. We worked on certain horror scenes, certain beats here and there, that felt more natural for me to direct in my own way than whoever had worked on the previous draft.

It was the same story; I mean, when you come to the middle of it, it's exactly the same script. It was just how it began and how it ended that seemed to keep changing; that's how it appeared to me. Also, when Bragi eventually read our draft, he said, 'Yeah, the script is different, but it's the same movie.' I was very happy to hear that.

Have you always wanted to put your own stamp on the Dracula story?

You never actually expect to be able to do anything like that in your life [*laughs*], so it's not like something I've been seeking out, I have to admit. He's the most amazing villain in Western culture, and it's a grand, Gothic, wonderful story, and then you get this very precise take on what may be the scariest and most intriguing chapter in the book, and it is its own contained movie right there. It's *Alien* on a ship in 1897, essentially, and you have Dracula, the most fantastic villain there is, as the monster. I get why people have spent 20 years trying to make it.


"It's Alien on a ship in 1897, essentially, and you have Dracula, the most fantastic villain there is, as the monster. I get why people have spent 20 years trying to make it."
-André Øvredal

DAVID DASTMALCHIAN CALLS HIS CHARACTER WOJCHEK "ONE OF THE GREAT JOURNEYS" OF HIS CAREER.

Dracula is indeed more of an outright monster in this film, so tell us about that, and also about casting Botet in the role.

Well, while Dracula is a sophisticated person, in this instance he's down to the bottom of his cycle. He's in a position where he desperately needs blood. In a way, he's put himself in a place where he has no control over how much blood he can access. It's an important plot point in the movie, and it's hard to talk about without being spoilery, how this all works and how it fits together. So we wanted to make him a scary figure. Dracula is hundreds of years old, and I wanted that to be reflected in his character, in the way he's presented. It was always Bragi's intention that this be a monstrous version of Dracula, and we wanted to stick with that.

And then there is a development of him turning even more feral than you would expect, and some of that is revealed in the trailer! We wanted him to be the most horrific, frightening depiction of Dracula that has ever been seen on screen, ideally. Most of the

Dracula movies, however wonderful they are, are very Gothic in nature, and they're very much about a character who's a human being, while this is a barely mentioned part of that story.

To create that, we needed a performer who could be agile and do these things that are superhuman, to a degree – beyond the ordinary. Javier is obviously the number-one go-to guy for all that. He's an amazing actor, and his body lends itself to unusual movements and silhouettes, and he came as the complete package for what we needed. And he's a terrific sport to work with. I mean, my God, the suffering that guy had to go through in those heavy masks and prosthetics, with the rain and the wind and practically not being able to breathe at times. What he does for his characters and performances is beyond what most people have to do in any job.

Can you tell us more about the makeup and who created it?

It was Göran Lundström [*The Batman*, *House of Gucci*], a great Swedish designer, and his team who did the creature effects. I also collaborated with Mike Hill [*Nightmare Alley*, *The Shape of Water*] early in the process on the first iterations of what it could look like, and then Göran took over. The work that he and his people put into it is astounding. It was similar to my experience with Guillermo del Toro on *Scary Stories*; it's amazing to watch someone who knows so much about the craft. There are wings and stuff going on with Dracula that are CGI, because we couldn't do them on set; it was physically impossible. But the body is real, with terrific details in everything, and in the end, it was Javier fighting to be able to perform it for hours on end during the shoot.

How gruesome do Dracula's activities become in the film?

It is a movie where blood is a key feature; it's actually the whole core aspect of the reason for the movie's existence, in a way. We wanted this to be a brutal movie, but I didn't want to go overboard; I didn't want to be gory just to be gory. I'm not interested in that; I'm interested in a serious

NOSFERATU (BOTET) WOULD MAKE A GOOD DECKHAND, IF YOU CAN GET PAST THE WHOLE UNDEAD THING.

PETROFSKY (NIKOLAI NIKOLAEFF) GETS THE BUSINESS.

PHOTOS LEFT & BOTTOM RIGHT BY RAINER BAJO / IMAGES COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT

"OK, NO, *THAR* SHE BLOWS." ANDRÉ ØVREDAL DIRECTS LIAM CUNNINGHAM ON THE SET OF *THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER*.

STAR COREY HAWKINS (AS CLEMONS) OFTEN WARMED UP THE CREW AND HIS CASTMATES (INCLUDING AISLING FRANCIOSI AS ANNA) WITH COFFEE AND CAKE DURING THE SHOOT.

horror story that is as existential as it is physical and visceral. Ideally, it is a balance over the course of this journey that can allow itself to be sophisticated and allow itself to be intense in its depiction of violence and blood.

What went into casting the other roles?

What we needed here was great character actors. We needed people who could apply all their skill and all their vitality and just be the best actors for the parts. So we got Corey Hawkins to play Clemens, our lead, and he loved the script. I had some great conversations with him early on about his inspirations for the role, and how that could work out with the realism of Clemens having studied in a big university in England. Which we researched, and it is true that a very, very few Black men were able to do that at that time. It's a huge, interesting part of his character, where he comes from and how he ends up on this ship and what his background is. Corey was involved in that, and he's such an excellent, giving actor. On certain days, suddenly these carts would come in that Corey had ordered, with coffee and cake for the entire crew. He would do this frequently during the shoot, and it was the most wonderful gesture.

And then it was a matter of, who would we want in these parts? Who would we want as Wojchek [the first mate]? Who would we want as the captain? And so on. Some of them were just names that were immediately thrown out by the very smart casting people at Amblin and in the UK, who really knew who's who and who could fit these parts. So we got Liam Cunningham for the captain, who was so great, and David Dastmalchian, Stefan Kapičić and Aisling Franciosi.

It was a very collaborative, ideal set of actors who all came together and are still good friends. I know that when the trailer came out, they were texting each other, and they're like a big family of people who have gone through an exciting experience they will never forget.

How about the Demeter itself, and simulating it being at sea?

We spent about a month in Berlin, where we built the entire interior set of the *Demeter* on gimbals so we could rock it and create that feeling of everything swaying and moving, and it would feel real for the actors. We built the whole cargo space with all these crates, and it was constructed as one big piece, so we could really feel the ship as a unified space. That was wonderful, and it became our lives for over a month. Then we moved to Malta, where the crew had constructed, over the same period of prep, the exterior of the *Demeter* in that huge tank they have there. We had all these water towers and rain towers and splash devices and these enormous lights illuminating the entire ship. For the first two or three weeks, we were filming in daytime, and then we started shooting at night. It was in the summer, so the nights weren't that long, and we really had to scramble to be able to shoot what we needed to. I still get PTSD from seeing the sun come up!

One of the potential concerns with telling this particular story is that if you know Dracula, you know how it ends, so was that on your mind while making the film?

Yes and no. It's always a question: Is that a negative or a positive? But I think you want to be part of that journey; you want to see how this happened, you want to see Dracula on board the *Demeter* and witness what actually went on there. That's what intrigued me when I read the script the very first time; it was the only time I was, in a way, neutral to the story, where I was just reading it and seeing the movie in my head. And I was enthralled by the way the opening worked, and the way it went on to tell that story. And I don't see that as a negative at all; I mean, we all knew the *Titanic* was going to go down when we watched that movie! 💀

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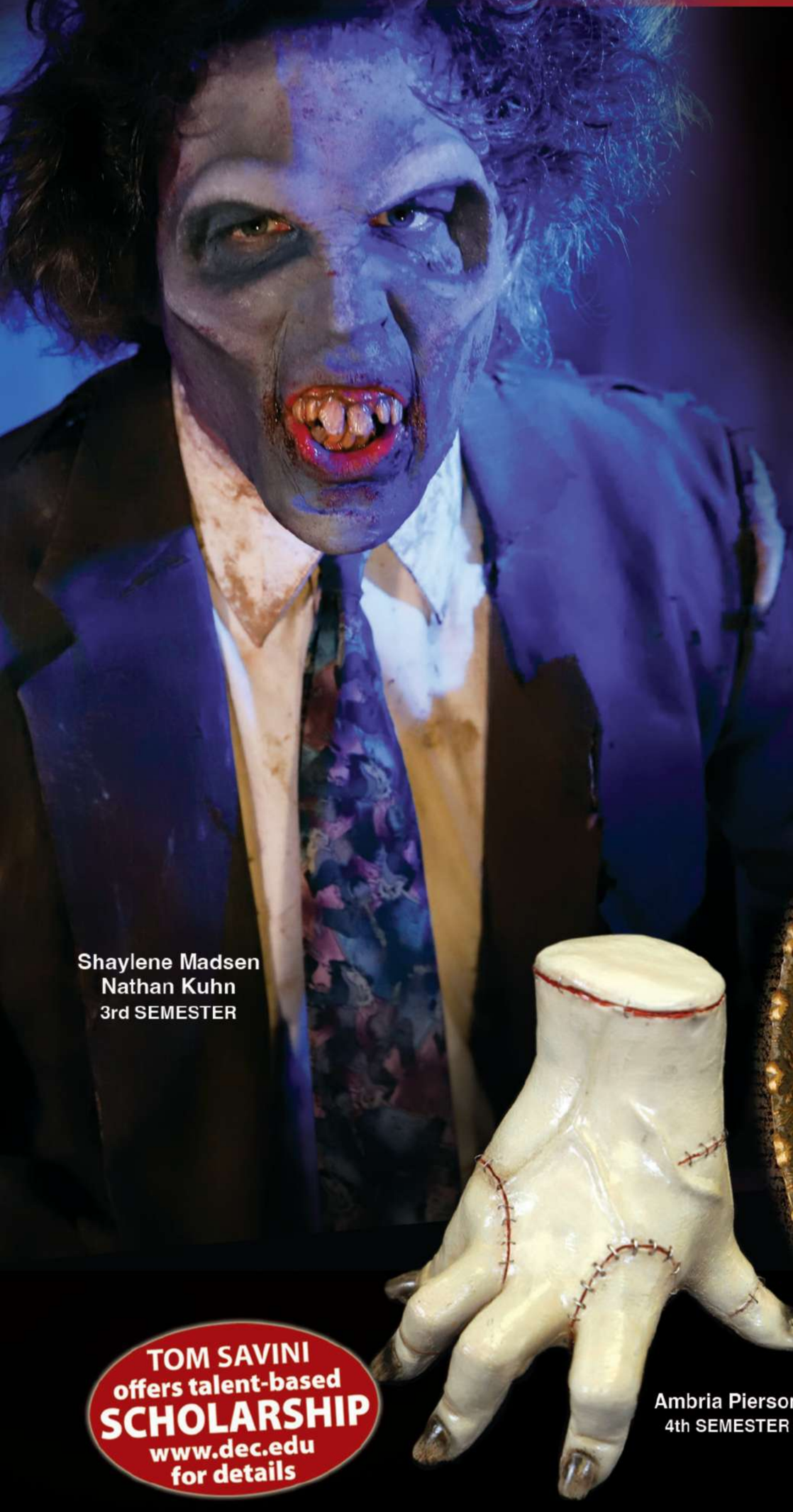

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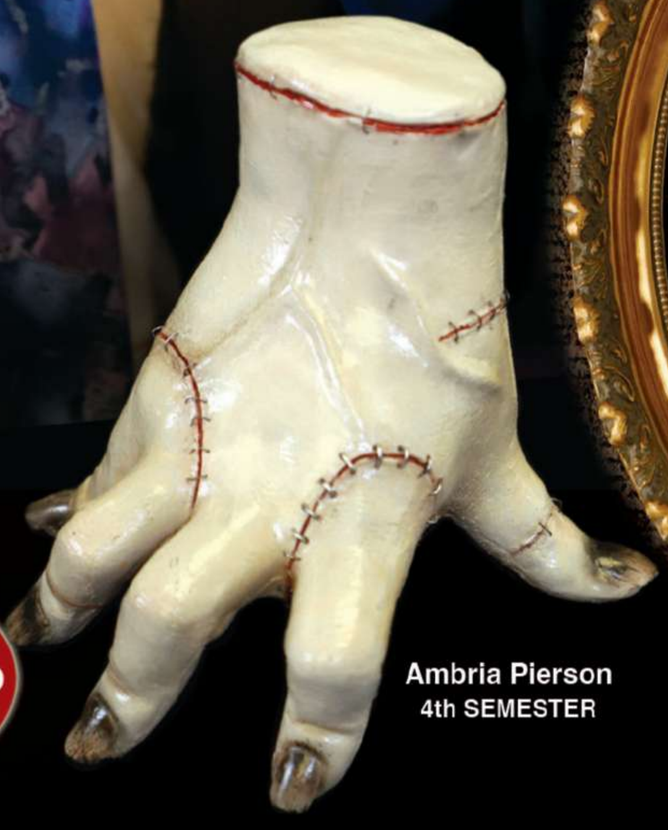

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JAVIER BOTET DREAMS OF DRACULA

BY DAVID DASTMALCHIAN

Two of the stars from André Øvredal's THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE DEMETER discuss bringing Bram Stoker's infamous sea-set chapter to life.

From the first time I read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, I was captivated by the fragmented narrative teased in the Captain's log, detailing the journey of doomed cargo sailing vessel The Demeter. Upon each subsequent reading, I grew increasingly convinced that this story would make an exceptional film. When I heard that monster master André Øvredal would be helming just such a movie, I sharpened my claws and fought tooth and nail to be a part of it.

Thankfully he approved my enlistment aboard that ill-fated ship. As a monster kid with a penchant for the classics, imagine my thrill at participating in a *Universal Studios film about Dracula*! And as an actor obsessed with the performances of Lon Chaney and Boris Karloff, I was delighted to work with the incredible Javier Botet as Nosferatu. It was a horror honor that I'll never forget. Be still, my cold, dead heart.

SEA SICK: DAVID DASTMALCHIAN AS WOJCHEK.

David: You worked with our friend André Øvredal before, on his amazing film *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*.

Javier: I only met him very briefly in Toronto on *Scary Stories*. It was very fast because I was shooting other projects. But it's always nice to work with somebody you already know. The first day I went to Berlin to make this film, he and I had lunch together to speak about the movie, and we were like excited kids. So happy to be in this same boat together, making a movie for Spielberg and Amblin, working on a Dracula movie. 'I'm going to play Dracula!' 'I'm going to direct it!'

I just said to my wife, 'I can't believe I'm getting ready to go interview Dracula from a Universal picture, for FANGORIA magazine.' This is one of the coolest moments of my entire career.

We are at a pretty sweet point. I am speaking with one of the big guys in the movie, and a Marvel star, and we're speaking about Dracula! People have always asked me in a lot of interviews, 'What role would be amazing to play?' And I always say, 'Dracula, Nosferatu; they are the origin of the monsters in the movies.' This was always my dream.

Monsters have spoken to me since my childhood in a small midwestern town, watching creature features on the late show. I have, over my career as a storyteller, developed an even stronger closeness, affinity, and kindred connectivity to them. What was it that drew you to monsters?

The first time something blew my mind in the cinema, I was in a theater and I was seeing *Return of the Jedi*. It was a bit shocking because there were a lot of creatures. My mind exploded, and I started having an obsession with all the creatures, aliens, monsters, all the things that don't really exist, but this magic in Hollywood that made them all come to life. And I found the same magic in horror, in amazing designs like *Alien*, like *Elm Street*, the girl in *The Exorcist*. And I start researching how the hell people make these things happen.

JAVIER BOTET GETS SOME TLC FROM GÖRAN LUNDSTRÖM AND PAMELA GOLDAMMER.

PHOTOS BY RAINER BAJO / IMAGES COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT

"I FOUND THE DARKEST PLACE OF MYSELF IN MY EYES."

– Javier Botet

But like you, I was living in small towns, and it's hard to feel that you can be part of this magic when you live in these places. That there's no way to study or to work with somebody in that field. When I finished my art studies, I moved to Madrid, where I saw an ad for an effects workshop, teaching makeup. And I said, 'Okay, that's the entry point.'

A few years later, I was working with this guy in a few movies. The FX guys started seeing my body, and my work, and asked to work with me. I went with some directors I worked with here in Spain to Fantastic Fest, just to watch movies. And I met Andy Muschietti there.

We spoke about his project, *Mama*, which was then a short. He said, 'I would love you to play Mama in a feature.' And I said, 'Sure, I would love that.' But a lot of people say that and it never happens. A year later he came back. 'Guillermo del Toro is going to produce it.' And that was an amazing inflection point. For *Mama* there was a movement test filmed, where everybody can see what I can do without makeup and FX. Guillermo and Andy asked me after the release, 'Do you want us to share the movement test online?' And I said, 'Yes, of course! For me it's good.' After this video, a lot of people started calling me, because finally people understood that almost everything you see, it's my work coming through.

"ALL THE CREATURES THAT I PORTRAY ARE BASED IN HUMAN FEARS, IN HUMAN PROBLEMS."

– Javier Botet

People now understood the foundation that they have with me and my body.

There's something I got to witness firsthand on the set. All the work you put into the creation of your character is not only expressed through your fingers, through your mouth, through your movement – but I found your eyes to be insanely captivating. Do you mind talking a little bit about what that process is for you? Peel away the makeup.

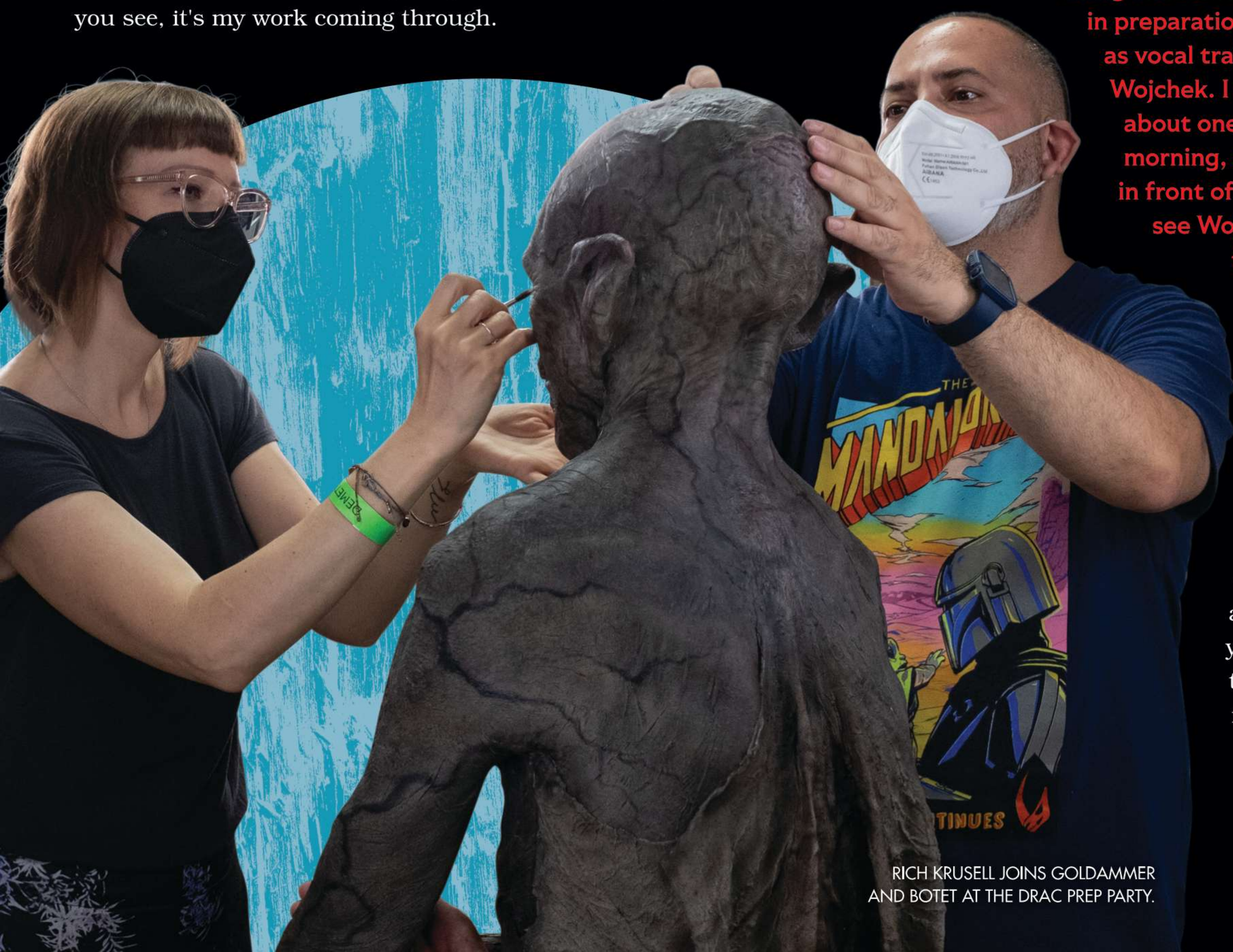
When Bram Stoker created Dracula, when Mary Shelley created Frankenstein, they gave them a lot of things that we can feel; these monsters are very human. And you can connect to that. Filming is hard. Makeup takes a long time. Sometimes you feel strong, but sometimes you feel weak, and you find moments – even in our movie – that you can show a little weakness, and use it. I find in the characters a human being, a life that suffers, that feels weak, that sometimes feels strong. But all the creatures that I portray are based in human fears, in human problems.

One of the things you do so well is give us this range of Dracula that goes from deep desperation, based on his need to feed, to extreme drunkenness on the power of control, which is also terrifying. We see this in real life. This is part of the human condition that is utterly terrifying. We can see it on the news, you can see it on the streets of any city. And Javier, you captured it all in this performance.

When I was a child, I always found a connection with the monsters. Even with the human monsters. When I see crime documentaries, with real monsters, psychopaths – no matter how crazy they are, inside there is a little child who suffered. He suffered through a lot of things that made him a monster. So I always find connection with the bad people.

You have to. Otherwise it's boring. And it's also inauthentic because this place, this hunger, this need that the characters have, it has to come from somewhere. For me, every day I would go through makeup, wardrobe. I was doing a lot of working out and training in preparation for the film, as well as vocal training for my character, Wojchek. I would go through this about one-hour process in the morning, and then I could stand in front of the mirror and really see Wojchek. Do you spend time looking in the mirror when you're in the full design?

I found the darkest place of myself in my eyes. In the dark center of your eyes, you find the energy of something dark, scary. When you are in full makeup, yes, you have a lot of scary things, nails, etc. But it's always in your eyes, if you know how to find it.



RICH KRUSELL JOINS GOLDAMMER AND BOTET AT THE DRAC PREP PARTY.

THE COUNTENANCES OF THE COUNT IN CLAY.

My process is rooted in things I have dealt with in my personal and private life: the disease of addiction, the disease of mental illness, as well as the autoimmune disorder that I have [vitiligo], which has created big white polka dot spots all over my body, which forced me for many years to believe that I was grotesque. And as I started to do the work personally, and then I found my connection to different characters that I was playing, I found it to be a beautiful insight.

I'm curious about your own diagnosis and experience with Marfan syndrome – the genetic disorder that led to your distinctive size and shape – and what effect that may have had on your psychological journey as an actor.

It was a problem; it's always a problem for everybody at first. But I always think, maybe thanks to the fantasy of cinema, I always found my body so fun, so special, so beautiful in a way. Of course I had the problem of the world not accepting you, but it was weird because I always appreciated it as something beautiful.

And I say, 'Okay, they don't accept, and I get it; I'm not normative, I'm not the same as everyone.' But I'd think, 'They're boring, they're all the same. And I am special.' But it was something I didn't connect to until I started exploring my body. I'd get out of the shower and spend a lot of time in the mirror saying, 'Wow, this is fun, this is beautiful, this is special.'

You are; it's beautiful. What's powerful to me about my extreme battles with the personal struggles I faced, or your very specific journey as someone who has a different body type than most average humans – there's the ability to celebrate, love, and embrace these things that make us different. When you bring people by the millions to the magic of movies, we must remember that every single person sitting in that cinema thinks that they are 'the other.' They don't belong. And I hope people reading this realize that what they think makes them 'different,' makes them 'ugly,' or 'broken,' is the thing that binds us. There is something so unifying in the genre, and I think that's so beautiful.

I just saw the movie yesterday, and you did an amazing job.

Thank you. This character was never the character I would've imagined playing in a Dracula film. I've always seen myself as a vampire, not a sailor. And when I found this character, I realized why I was meant to play him. He was one of the great challenges, and one of the great journeys I've ever taken as an actor. I was playing a character who had been through an intensely grueling physical ordeal. Who was emotionally and psychologically pushed to the limit.

And while I'm in that dark place... here comes Javier. The way you moved across the stage was eerie. On set, the energy that I could feel coming from you, even when I couldn't see where you were exactly, was terrifying.

You have to respect everyone's work. After all the time spent by [creature designer] Göran Lundström and his team, the amazing work the makeup crew did, the months of designing, all these hours of work by people who love and respect this material, I feel the responsibility and the respect and that love of cinema in my entire body. And when I make my way to the set, I feel how all of my castmates love and respect the role, and the work of these artists. Art, pure art. So it gives you a special power to feel totally grateful and lucky to be there.

You know who's the luckiest? All of our fellow monster kids who are going to go to the cinema and see this story brought to life. When they see what you've manifested here, it is so captivating, it's so powerful, it's so horrifying. Seeing you just unleash complete and utter hell is really fun.

Well, our work is finished, and now it's the fans' time to decide what to do with our Dracula. The audience is now those excited kids we were, and they are now the owners of our hard work. I'm excited to share it with them. 💀

This conversation was edited for length and clarity.

FACE DOWN, BATS UP: INSIDE THE *DEMETER* WORKSHOP.

PHOTOS BY RAINER BAJO / IMAGES COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT

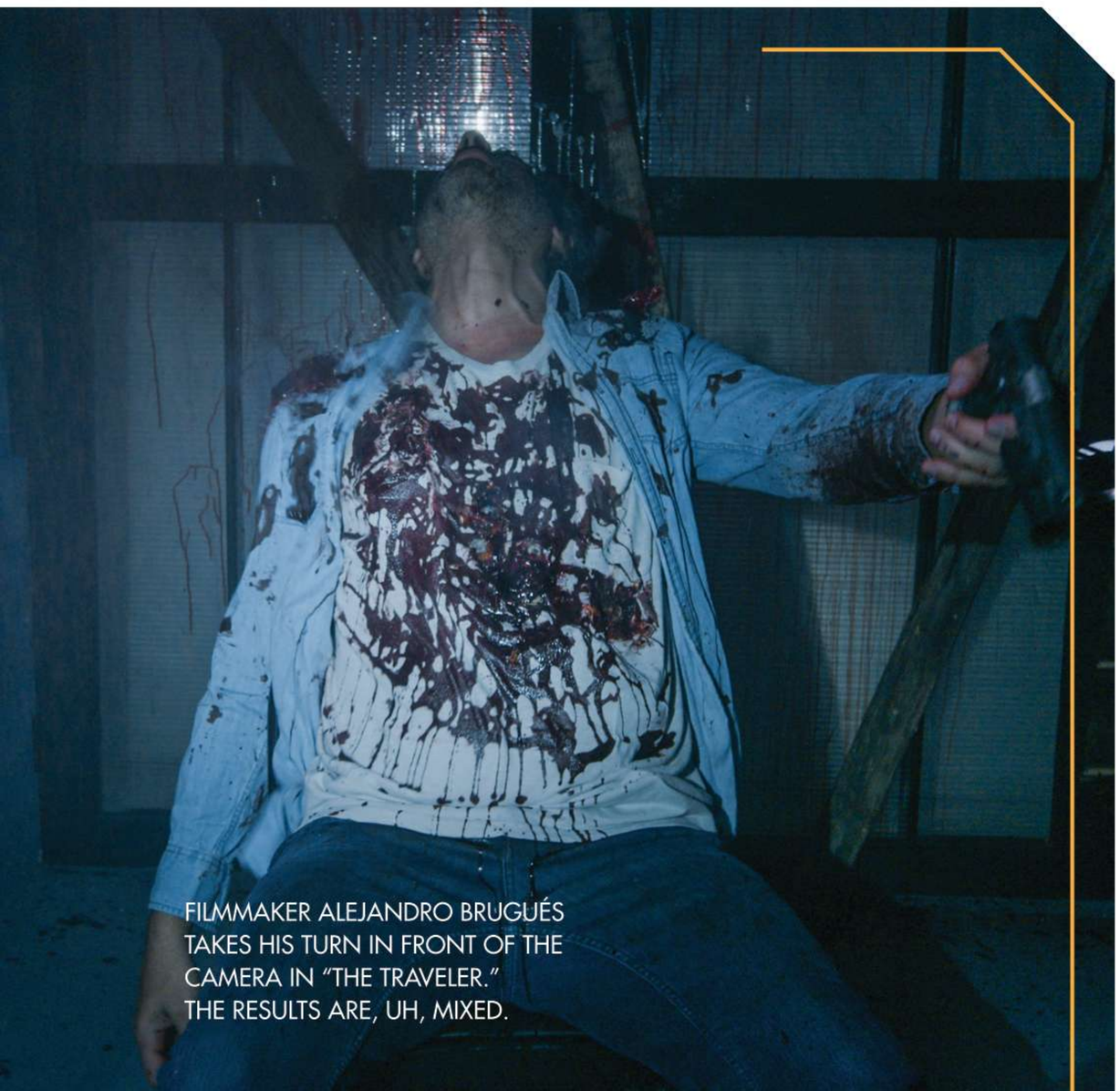
¡DIOS MIO! IT'S SATANIC HISPANICS

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD • ILLUSTRATION BY PUIS CALZADA

"Mike Mendez and I met at Fantastic Fest years ago, shooting shotguns, and we immediately became friends," Cuban filmmaker Alejandro Brugués (*Juan of the Dead*) recalls. "He was the editor of *Nightmare Cinema*, which I directed a segment for, and we had a blast. One day we realized there's never been a full Latino horror anthology, and I joked that we should make one called *Satanic Hispanics*. Somehow, that stupid joke turned into 'Hell yeah, let's make it!' Mike approached Patrick Ewald at Epic Pictures, whom he had worked with a bunch of times, and Patrick said, 'I'll produce it' right on the spot."

Katie Page joined Mendez, who is of Salvadoran heritage, Brugués and Ewald on the producing team, and Argentinean Demián Rugna, Cuban-born Eduardo Sánchez and Mexican Gigi Saul Guerrero were recruited to direct segments of *Satanic Hispanics* (opening nationwide in September from Epic's Dread label and Iconic Events) along with Mendez and Brugués. According to Mendez (*Big Ass Spider!*), the guidelines were simple: "Shorts about the myths and legends of Latin America. Monsters and practical gore were strongly encouraged, and we all had a uniform aspect ratio. Other than that, it was just, 'Go out and have fun and make the most bad-ass horror short you can.'"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EPIC PICTURES



FILMMAKER ALEJANDRO BRUGUÉS TAKES HIS TURN IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA IN "THE TRAVELER." THE RESULTS ARE, UH, MIXED.

AS SAN LA MUERTE, DEATH GETS A GLOW-UP.

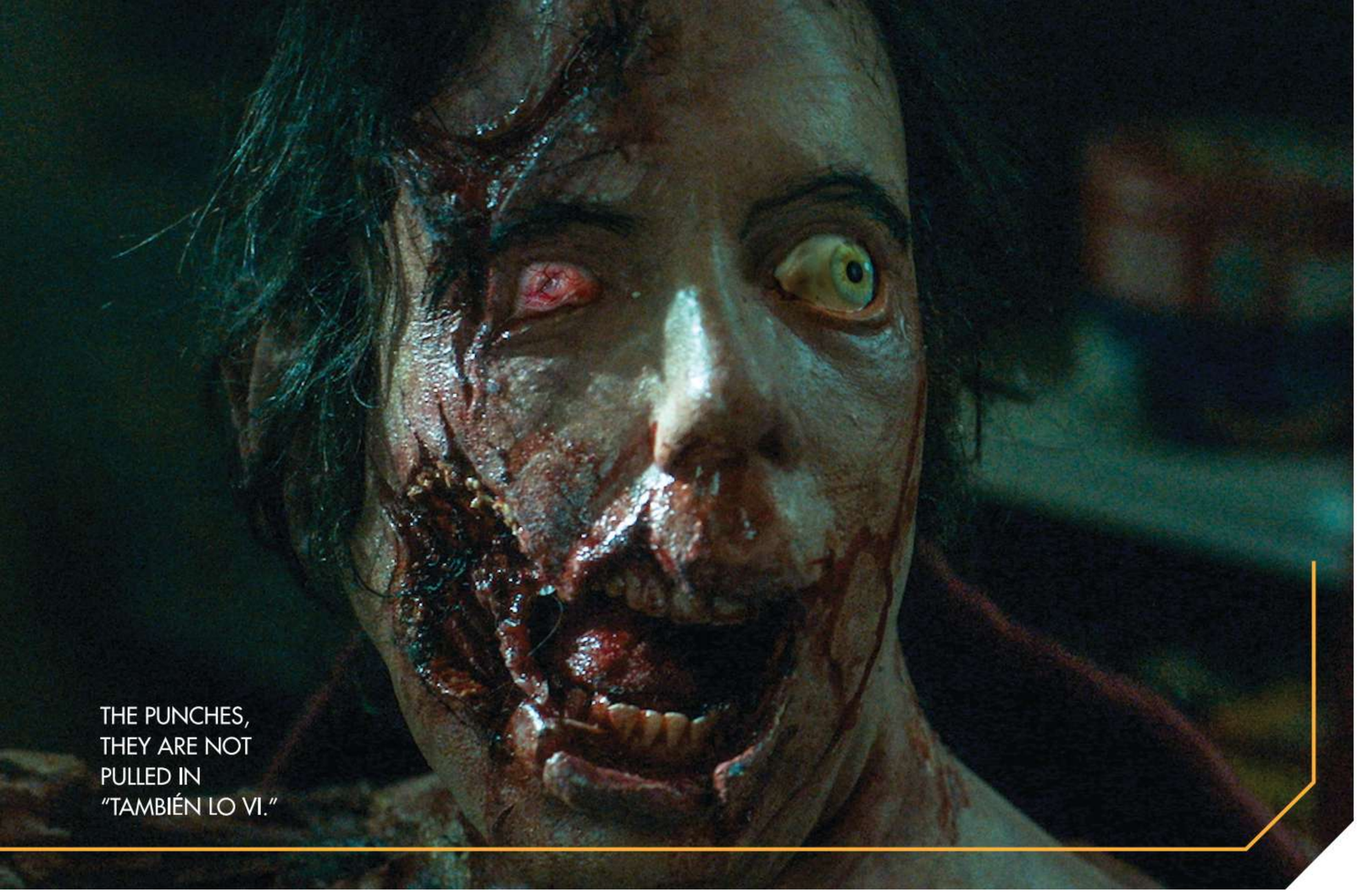
"THE TRAVELER" & "SAN LA MUERTE": MIKE MENDEZ

Following an opening scene in which a building full of Latino corpses is discovered by the cops, "The Traveler" (written by Alejandro Mendez) takes us to a police station where detectives Arden (Greg Grunberg) and Gibbons (Sonya Eddy) question the titular lone survivor (Efren Ramirez). The Traveler regales his interrogators with accounts of evil and misfortune he's come across, and the movie returns to him to introduce us to each succeeding story.

"It's a bit of a misdirect," Mendez notes. "My short and the film start with what looks like a border/narcos type of thing, but I wanted to move past that into a much grander tale of immortals, gods, and magic. The point was to go beyond those types of stories we commonly see on television and in movies today and show a different type of Latino narrative — something far bigger than another drug-cartel movie."

During the "Traveler" portion and the interstitials that follow, Mendez remains in a recognizable reality as the Traveler relates his tales to the detectives. Once this framing situation reaches its own turning point at the film's end (in a segment titled "San La Muerte"), it suddenly goes full-bore occult. Making that transition, Mendez says, "was tricky, and scary to a certain point because mine is the through-line, and it wasn't until I was in the editing room that I thought, why did we write three people sitting at a table for the majority of this short?! But thankfully, through everyone's dedication and effort, it all works."

Mendez is thrilled to be part of not only the first-ever Latin American horror anthology, but one that will introduce viewers of all ethnicities to fresh fear fodder. "It's not a heavy message film, it's just something different — a distinctive flavor — and it offers an exploration of myths and legends that I feel are largely unexplored, certainly by American audiences."



THE PUNCHES, THEY ARE NOT PULLED IN "TAMBIÉN LO VI."

"TAMBIÉN LO VI": DEMIÁN RUGNA

Rugna, who frightened audiences around the world with his 2017 movie *Terrified*, was a natural choice for the *Satanic Hispanics* lineup. Yet he reveals that when Brugués contacted him about being involved, "I said yes, but told Ale, 'I don't want you to hate me if I drop out of the project at any time, because my career is so volatile.' I was about to shoot a feature [*When Evil Lurks*, for which Shudder picked up distribution rights] and was signing a deal with a studio for an imminent follow-up movie. Then when they found the money, I tried to get off *Satanic Hispanics* about five times, but Alejandro played psychologist and kept me on board.

"The truth is, I didn't have the script until 15 days before starting prep," he admits. "The team kept asking for the script, because they needed some kind of basic story so they could shoot the 'Traveler' introduction, and I decided I needed to do something simple: a controlled story set in one house, no exteriors, not too many effects. And I wrote back to them: 'A guy sees monsters using a light in the darker zones of his home.'"

In "También Lo Vi" ("I Saw It Too"), that guy is Gustavo (Demián Salomón), who applies his problem-solving mind to Rubik's Cube tournaments and discovers a more vexing challenge under his own roof. Believing his house to be haunted, he utilizes a flashlight, waving the beam in a certain pattern through the rooms, to draw forth the spirits, and succeeds — quite scarily so. Unlike some of his *Satanic* cohorts, Rugna didn't draw on actual mythology or paranormal practices for inspiration. "It is based on mathematics," he says, "and the idea that one can access the world of the dead with this algorithm from anywhere in the world.

"*When Evil Lurks*," he continues, "had been filming that movie for eight weeks, and it was a very complex project with many exteriors and child actors. So it was very satisfying to be able to shoot 'También Lo Vi' in five days in a very controlled environment like that house was.

"Gigi and I asked to shoot our segments in our original languages," he adds. "If our stories were taking place in our towns, we could not tell them in English. Now I feel the film represents all Latino people, from the big community in the States to those in the southern latitudes."

"EL VAMPIRO": EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ

On the other side of that geography, Sánchez shot his entry in his native Maryland, and decided to take a lighter approach than his previous filmography, which includes *The Blair Witch Project* and *Lovely Molly*. "At first I was thinking of doing something serious," he explains, "but then I read Alejandro's script and realized I could go off the humorous deep end. I rarely get to do comedy, so I figured I'd spread my wings a little bit with something completely ridiculous."

"El Vampiro," written by Adam Cesare, proceeds from a simple comic premise: the bloodsucker of the title (Hemky Madera) takes advantage of Halloween night to indulge in some real carnage, but then discovers he has failed to factor Daylight Savings Time into his plans. "I've always had the urge to make a funny vampire film," Sánchez says, "and the hook was all I needed to get the wheels spinning."

The director has plenty of experience with the short form, having helmed episodes of series such as *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Supernatural*, *Yellowjackets* and *Queen of the South*. It was on the latter gig that he met and became friends with Madera, who also has a long tele-résumé (including a stint on *Ash vs. Evil Dead*) in both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. "I thought of him immediately for 'El Vampiro,'" Sánchez says. "His comedic chops are amazing but rarely exploited in his body of work, so I was looking forward to showing off this side of him."

HEMKY MADERA HOLDS COURT AND CORAZÓN AS EL VAMPIRO.

TOP: SORCERESS MADRE TIERRA (GABRIELA RUÍZ) IS LEAVING US SPELLBOUND IN "NAHUALES."

BOTTOM: ARI GALLEGOS (LEFT) AND MARCIO MORENO (RIGHT) GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL IN "NAHUALES."

"NAHUALES": GIGI SAUL GUERRERO

When Mendez and Brugués got in touch with Guerrero about *Satanic Hispanics*, "They literally said, 'Gigi, no questions asked, you're doing this anthology with us!'" she remembers. And she didn't need much convincing. "I was feeling frustrated by the constant rejection in the industry, the constant free hours of work to prove my worth for the next project, and then nothing. So let's just say I was in a bad mood when they called me [*laughs*], which is why 'Nahuales' is so violent! I was also feeling cranky that we don't tell enough indigenous stories in general, that my country has so much corruption, etc. So I of course said, 'Count me the fuck in, hermanos!'"

Like Mendez's contribution, Guerrero's begins in the world of crime before descending into a realm of supernatural punishment, as the shotgun-wielding De la Cruz (Ari Gallegos) flees to a safehouse in the countryside before falling into the clutches of a sorceress known as Madre Tierra (Gabriela Ruíz). With the likes of *Into the Dark: Culture Shock* and *Bingo Hell* among her credits, Guerrero is not a stranger to infusing horror with sociopolitical concerns, though she says, "If you're going to bring in those themes, it is your responsibility as the filmmaker to also make it entertaining, and give audiences a reason to escape the real horrors of the world."

Raynor Shima, who scripted "Nahuales" with Shadan Saul, adds, "We wanted to maintain a sense of being grounded, but with a gradual shift toward the spiritual and supernatural elements, along with a touch of gore, of course." Let us pause here to note that "a touch" is putting it extremely mildly. "We believe that infusing Mexican folklore into our projects is important, and we continually strive to discover innovative and captivating ways to intertwine them."

In this case, a "Nahual" is a human who can shapeshift into an animal and maintain a spiritual connection to that creature, using their powers for good or evil depending on their identity. For further authenticity, Guerrero, Shima, and co. filmed in the Catemaco region, which Shima describes as "the capital of witchcraft in Mexico. This area is profoundly sacred, brimming with spiritual energy; it is both breathtakingly beautiful and eerily haunting."

Guerrero feels strongly about the importance of *Satanic Hispanics* in the landscapes of both horror and Latino cinema. "Latinos make up a massive amount of horror fans," she says. "We are spiritual, and love all things spooky and weird. It's in our culture and blood to look at death differently, so we needed this kind of anthology."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EPIC PICTURES

"THE HAMMER OF ZANZIBAR": ALEJANDRO BRUGUÉS

What is "The Hammer of Zanzibar"? Well…that should really be left for you to discover when you see the movie. All that should be described about Brugués' entry is that it starts with a conversation between Malcolm (Jonah Ray Rodrigues) and his ex-girlfriend Amy (Danielle Chaves) in a diner that takes some *very* unexpected turns.

This episode has its origins in Brugués' long-held desire to create "a horror/comedy feature told in chapters, having fun with the structure. It started with a first scene pretty similar to what's in the short, and then jumped to different chapters; we'd have one about 'what happened in Havana,' etc. I was thinking about a *Kill Bill* structure, and of course, I needed my Hattori Hanzō moment, so I came up with the scene where they go get their weapon."

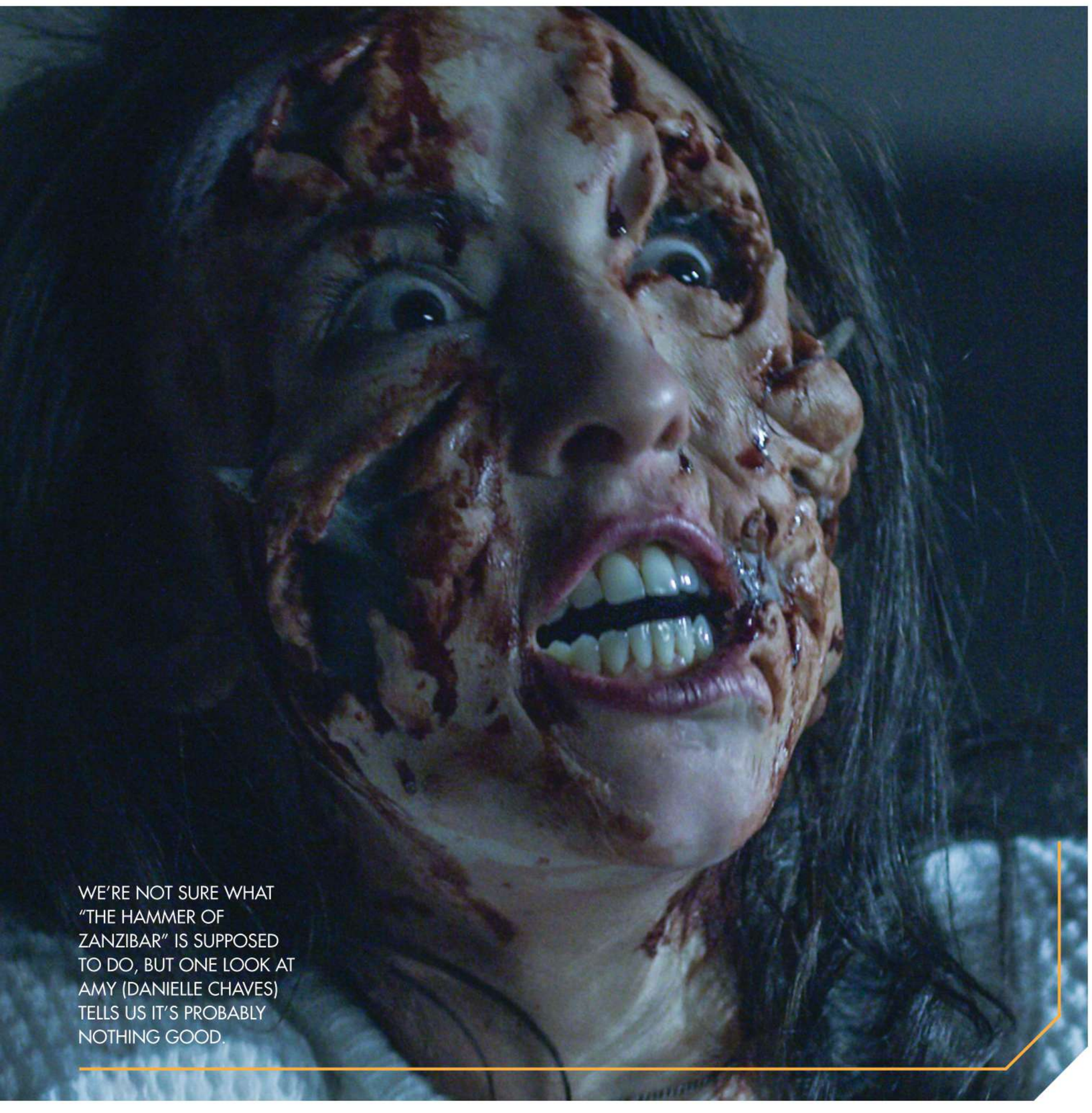
He wound up pitching the idea to Sam Raimi when he directed an episode of Quibi's Raimi-produced series *50 States of Fright*. "I wanted my demon, Nzambi Mpungo, to be sort of a Caribbean cousin of his Kandarian demon, and to call the film Mala Muerte, which was how *The Evil Dead* was known in Cuba. When I finished telling Sam my idea, there was a long pause, and then he said, 'Oh my God, I love it!' But they were already doing *Evil Dead Rise*, so it was a no.

"The idea stayed dormant until I needed something for this anthology," Brugués continues. "I said to Mike, 'I have this idea, and you should talk me out of it.' I told him what it was, and he was like, 'Fuck yeah, you have to do it!' So I pretty much had no choice; I had to cram the whole feature into 20 minutes."

As nutty as "The Hammer of Zanzibar," scripted by Lino K. Villa, becomes, Brugués insists that everything that happens in it is based on actual folklore. "For starters, the ceremony Malcolm talks about at the beginning is real. Some Afro-Cuban religions have these secret ceremonies involving sacrifices. Then, all the possessions Malcolm talks about are real deities from Palo Mayombe: Siete Rayos, who rules over fire; Kimbambula, ruler of wind; Mama Chola, in charge of the human pleasures. And of course the big baddie, Nzambi Mpungo, King Zombie, who's actually sort of the creator, but with a cooler name.

"And the Popobawa is real. Look it up. It actually is a demon from Zanzibar, and what it does is pretty much what's described in the film. I don't want to get into spoilers, but the moment I read about that, I was like, 'I *need* to put this in a movie.' So the ceremony is real, the demons are real, and the Popobawa is real. And if you don't believe me — well, tickets to Zanzibar aren't that expensive."

NO NOTES! MORGANA IGNIS IS *KILLING* IT AS KING ZOMBIE IN "THE HAMMER OF ZANZIBAR."



WE'RE NOT SURE WHAT "THE HAMMER OF ZANZIBAR" IS SUPPOSED TO DO, BUT ONE LOOK AT AMY (DANIELLE CHAVES) TELLS US IT'S PROBABLY NOTHING GOOD.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EPIC PICTURES

MOMMY ALWAYS WINS

By Annie Rose Malamet

LYLE WRITER/DIRECTOR STEWART THORNDIKE IS BACK WITH SOME *BAD THINGS* TO SHOW YOU.

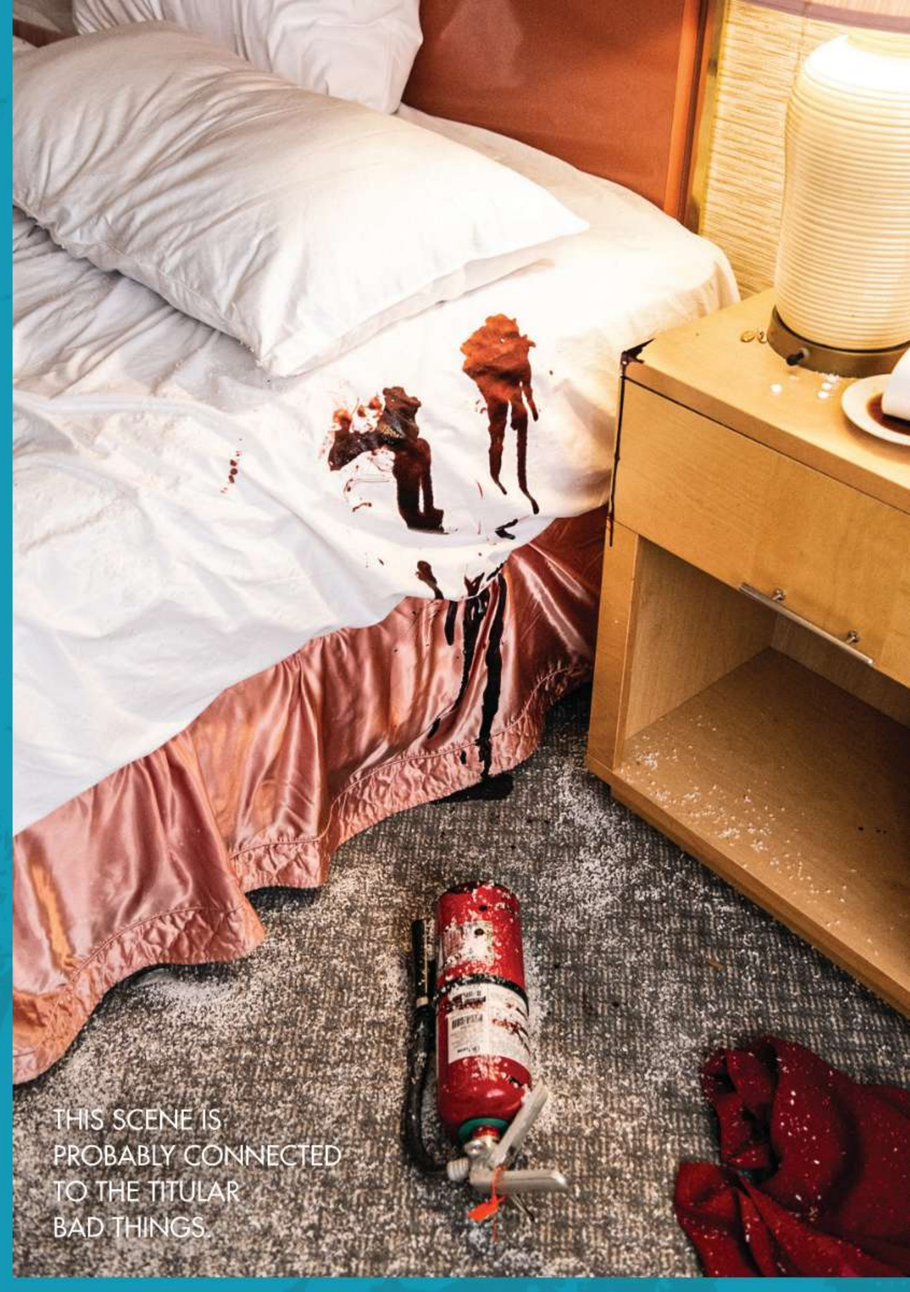
Stewart Thorndike does not respect people who don't appreciate horror. "As a young child, I felt very isolated by a lot of the media I saw," she told FANGORIA during a recent phone call. "I had a darkness in me. What I liked to see was grown-ups agonizing. I wanted to see good lighting and seriousness and big issues… and I wanted to feel a little sick." Indeed, the agonies of adulthood, specifically motherhood, and an internalized dark pathology that threatens to boil over are themes that characterize the director's two feature films. Viewers first experienced Thorndike's brand of tense, adult psychological horror in her 2014 debut film *Lyle*, which has been described as a queer *Rosemary's Baby*. The ideas presented in that film have had time to percolate, finally taking form in her newest film *Bad Things*, which is set to premiere August 18th on Shudder.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

Whereas *Lyle* was the lesbian answer to Roman Polanski's landmark, satanic horror film, *Bad Things* is a queer homage to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. A young woman named Ruthie (Gayle Rankin), her partner and two friends traverse a winter storm to inspect an abandoned hotel Ruthie's inherited, and it gradually becomes clear something sinister is brewing — both within the hotel, and within the group of women. Ruthie reads as a dykey Jack Torrance, though her motivations are more rooted in generational suffering and abject neglect as opposed to patriarchal control run amok. "[Jack Torrance] hates his family… I thought of it as the patriarchy on full display, that he's allowed to hate them, and it's not considered sinister in the world he's in." When asked why Thorndike is interested in *The Shining* and *Rosemary's Baby* as influences on her own work, she simply responded, "They're perfect," an assessment any cinephile would be hard-pressed to disagree with.

The appeal of the two classics is partly based on aesthetics, triumphs of cinematography, framing, and set design. But the ineffable appeal of both lies within the ambiguity of the horror elements, leaving viewers unsure if what we are seeing is real outside the fractured psyche of the main characters. "I've always had a deep attraction to stories where you're de-stabilized and you don't know who to believe and you don't know who to trust," said Thorndike. Like *Lyle* before it, *Bad Things* draws on a history of psychologically tense horror that hints at the indeterminate supernatural, creating an atmosphere of dread based on precarious trust and neurotic paranoia. Thorndike actually acted in Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, another movie that deals in secrecy and caged angst.

Lyle and *Bad Things* are part of a trilogy Thorndike is working on that deals with the horrors of motherhood. While *Lyle* explored the psychology of a new mother, the horror of *Bad Things* capitulates around the trauma of the absent mother wound. Thorndike is unsurprisingly familiar with the work of psychoanalytic theorist Barbara Creed on the monstrous feminine, an examination of the various, human terrors of being ripped from the mother-void and our subsequent return to an unknowable abyss. Although *The Monstrous Feminine* is mainly concerned with body horror and Thorndike's films are more psychological in their approach, *Lyle* and *Bad Things* both explore the horror of mother-child continuity becoming necessarily discontinuous through the separation of birth. In other words, we are born attached, we need our mothers to survive birth and infancy, and then by necessity, we must detach and become whole, separate beings. In *Bad Things*, the mother-daughter relationship as a site of both intense love and despair measured by connection and neglect is at the core of the film. "This attachment to a mother can prevent you from moving forward," Thorndike said. "It's kind of a love triangle between [Ruthie's] mom and her would-be lovers and partners… that's her real true love, her mother. It's a love story for me. It's a love triangle, but mommy wins."



THIS SCENE IS PROBABLY CONNECTED TO THE TITULAR BAD THINGS.

And how could mommy not win? At the risk of spoiling the mystery, let's just say the motherly apparition that haunts the empty, 1980s art deco hotel is played by Molly Ringwald in a red skirt-suit with matching red hosiery. When I asked Thorndike what it was like to work with the cinematic legend, she described Ringwald as a collaborative artist who "loves culture." Ringwald shows a mastery of her craft here, and it's a delight to see her vamp in her first horror feature since 2000's *Cut*.

As Ruthie, Gayle Rankin is severe in all the right places. Most will know Rankin from her role as Sheila the She-Wolf on Netflix's *GLOW*, and she certainly brings the caustic ferality of that character into her performance of the shell-shocked mama's girl that is Ruthie. Hari Nef plays Cal, Ruthie's narrative foil girlfriend that she cannot seem to be faithful to. In casting Cal, Thorndike wanted someone who was "dripping with charm" in an attempt to get the audience on her side. Hari Nef is a magnetic presence, and audiences will likely immediately root for her character. But according to Thorndike, "She's actually the most dangerous character. She's kind of passive

STEWART THORNDIKE RUNS THROUGH A SCENE WITH GAYLE RANKIN AND MOLLY RINGWALD.

PHOTOS BY WILLIAM CALLAN

aggressive and she's sort of arranged this to happen. You don't notice she's pulling the strings." The kind of people-pleasing codependency that Nef's character represents should be familiar to queer viewers who struggle with attachment wounds. There is something essentially queer about the dysfunction exhibited in Ruthie and Cal's relationship; it exemplifies the horror of trying to save someone who doesn't want to be saved, and the way those fawning intentions are actually quite controlling when examined more closely.

Thorndike described Annabelle Dexter-Jones as bringing a certain level of class to the role of Fran, the messy, perhaps insane, tacked-on guest of the group with romantic eyes set on Ruthie. The sleek, white, minimalist two-piece she wears denotes a kind of effortless wealth that is aptly out of place amidst the outdated hotel and the more punkish outfits of the other characters. Outfitting was important to Thorndike, who described the process with costume designer Nell Simon as highly collaborative. Certainly, each character's look says something about their psychological state, whether it be Ruthie's yellow jacket, Cal's Hole sweatshirt, or Maddie's mismatched stripes and florals. Rad Pereira is an exciting newcomer, a multi-spirit mixed Black, Indigenous Brazilian, Jewish actor who brings a soft, comforting masculinity to the role of Maddie, their conflicting emotions about Cal and Ruthie reflected through their apparel.

Thorndike described herself and her sensibility as "pervy," and there is certainly a perverse pleasure in the queer romantic intrigue that binds the characters together. In Thorndike's view, the concept of "pervy" is "sometimes just seeing things in a different way," delighting in that, and subverting what we've come to expect from a narrative. Like much of Kubrick's filmography, the thematic perversion lies in the discomfort of uncertainty, and of the rage lurking beneath the surface. "I guess I'm just angry and I want to be heard," Thorndike told me, "and I want to take people's eyes and make them see what I want them to see."

There is an unflinching quality to *Bad Things*, although the machinations of the hotel and its inhabitants are largely cloaked in mystery. We're unsure if the hotel is supernaturally possessing the characters, or if they are so untethered they just think it is. But what is certain is the hot sting of unexamined fury and resentment seeping out of their every word and action, often cloaked in double-speak and quiet tantrums. The world of the film is one of conflict; even the bright colors and lighting directly contrast with the obscured motivations and suffocating setting. The contradictions should put viewers on the edge, that sweet spot that's sure to complete Stewart Thorndike's ultimate vision of anxious unease. 💀

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

RUTHIE (GAYLE RANKIN) ENGAGING IN SOME *BAD THINGS*.

PARTY GAMES: An Interview With The Team Behind THE BLACKENING

By Richard Newby

Director Tim Story and writers Tracy Oliver and Dewayne Perkins ride that razor-thin line between horror and comedy with their new slasher.

From epic sci-fi thrillers like *Nope*, man vs. animal flicks like *Beast*, supernatural romances like *Bones and All*, and documentaries like *Horror Noire*, the current vibe in the Black genre space is a celebratory one. While Black horror filmmakers have long fought for a seat at the table, this post-*Get Out* era feels like they've made a place for themselves and gotten comfortable, though not so comfortable that they stopped looking for new angles through which to explore the genre and surprise audiences. Black horror is at the party now, and everyone wants an invite.

The festivities continue with Lionsgate's *The Blackening*, a horror-comedy slasher from director Tim Story (*Ride Along*), and writers Tracy Oliver (*Girls Trip*) and Dewayne Perkins (*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*). A group of friends, portrayed by Perkins, Grace Byers (*Empire*), Antoinette Robertson (*Dear White People*), Sinqua Walls (*Nanny*), Melvin Gregg (*Nine Perfect Strangers*), X Mayo (*Swarm*), Jermaine Fowler (*Coming 2 America*), Yvonne Orji (*Spontaneous*), and Jay Pharaoh (*Saturday Night Live*) get together at a cabin in the woods for Juneteenth weekend. Upon discovering a hidden game room, the friends are drawn into the life and death of a board game, The Blackening, which forces them to determine who among them is the most Black by answering questions about Black history and culture, and putting their skills at spades to the test. The losers have the misfortune of being hunted by a crossbow-wielding killer in a Black Sambo mask.

FANGORIA chatted with Story, Oliver, and Perkins back in April about the state of Black horror, the joys of their collaborative experience, making a horror crowd-pleaser, and if they could pass the first test of *The Blackening*.

First off, how good are each of you at spades?

Tracy Oliver: I'm really good! I grew up in a household where I was not allowed to not be good *[laughs]*.

Dewayne Perkins: I am not. The minute they're not paying attention I give up *[laughs]*.

Tim Story: I'm good enough to play. I'm safe!

Black genre films are really getting the spotlight now, but I think people often overlook the rich history of black horror and comedies, especially in the '90s. *The Blackening* reminded me a lot of those in terms of its hangout vibes. What is it you guys wanted to add to the Black horror, or Black genre film, conversation with *The Blackening*?

DP: I think there's a couple of answers. Obviously, you want to create something new that embodies the comedy and horror that you love, but also have fun. I thought we could reach more people by speaking about 'the thing' without directly speaking about 'the thing.' We didn't want to be

IT AIN'T YAHTZEE: MORGAN (YVONNE ORJI) AND SHAWN (JAY PHAROAH) UNCOVER A DEADLY GAME, RUN BY A MYSTERIOUS KILLER (OPPOSITE).

PHOTOS BY GLEN WILSON / COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

burdened by some of the systems that pre-date the movies we were influenced by. It freed us up in the act of exploring the subtext.

TO: I'll add, it's funny that you mentioned the '90s because in terms of talking about the tone we couldn't find anything in the last few years that had come out that we could reference. So, we looked at the original *Scream*, and *Scary Movie*. *Scary Movie* is funny, but we wanted to be a little more grounded in reality. But what I liked about the *Scream* movies was that they were comedic and fun, but also really meta in terms of exploring the tropes without taking itself too seriously. Those films are really rooted in the audience having fun. That was something all three of us were really onboard with. Tonally we wanted *The Blackening* to be a crowd-pleaser and for people to come out of it with their families and friends clapping and feeling like they really enjoyed themselves. That's a quality that I've really missed.

TS: What's great about it is that if you want to get serious about anything in this movie that you're laughing at, you can have a serious conversation about it. But on the surface, we're really kind of giving you your medicine while you're laughing, and we can leave it at that and it's okay. It's okay to just laugh at this movie and not come out of it with any lesson at all, but you can also get deeper into it.

DP: In terms of intentionality, we were very conscious of making sure we had an answer for all the deeper conversations the film could raise.

As you're dealing with text and subtext of Black history and Black relationships, you're also bringing in elements of horror and comedy, which filmmakers have often noted is a challenging combo. How did you find the balance between these elements?

TS: It definitely started with the script. What these geniuses put together was such a great blueprint to get started. And then we found more layers to explore during rehearsals and on set when we were shooting. One of the things that I thought was great

MORGAN IS LIVE (FOR NOW) ON TV.

"Tonally we wanted *The Blackening* to be a crowd-pleaser and for people to come out of it with their families and friends clapping and feeling like they really enjoyed themselves. That's a quality that I've really missed."
- Tracy Oliver

WITH THE CANDLESTICK IN THE PARLOR, LISA (ANTOINETTE ROBERTSON) GETS A CLUE.

being on set was I would listen to the actors between shots and what they were talking about and sometimes we found things that would make us laugh and we would incorporate them in. That's what was great about this collaboration. We were all open to the idea of what else could emerge. It's been a long time since I've been in a completely creative space in terms of figuring out what a movie was. I think we all knew what it should be in the end, and we just allowed it to mature. And Tracy said it often – there was this feeling of 'are they really letting us make this?' *[laughs]*. It ended up being something that's so organic and I think that's what you want in any artistic space.

One of things I really appreciated is the casting. You have a lot of really talented up-and-coming Black folks in here, including Dewayne who's pulling double-duty as writer and actor. And they all have such great chemistry with each other. What was the casting process like?

TS: We had a good time with the casting. We kinda knew what we were looking for and as soon as that actor or actress revealed themselves, we were pretty quick to go, 'Oh wow, they're the one.' At the same time, we couldn't tell anybody immediately that they'd gotten it because, beyond the chemistry, we were also looking for a combination of the right personalities. We didn't want anybody to have to play a character, per se. We wanted to find people who had that role or character in them already so that we could keep it extremely grounded. Tracy and I didn't tell Dewayne this but we both kinda knew Dewayne was going to be in the movie early on, but we couldn't tell him.

DP: *[laughs]*. I had no idea.

TS: So, what we did was protect anybody that was like him from being cast in the movie, so that lane remained completely open to Dewayne. There were actors who came in who were amazing! But their energy was too close to Dewayne.

TO: There was a lot of physical dancing around, too. You're never going to cover all aspects of Blackness on screen, but we wanted to get as much of a diverse group as possible. So, we

ALLISON (GRACE BYERS) NAVIGATES THE KILLER'S SICK GAME.

PHOTOS BY GLEN WILSON / COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

THE KILLER TAKES AIM AT (BELOW, L-R) LISA, ALLISON, CLIFTON (JERMAINE FOWLER) AND DEWAYNE (DEWAYNE PERKINS).

looked at actors with a lot of different complexions, hairstyles, personalities, and all of that was really deliberate when we went into casting because we wanted everybody to feel like their own character and stand out on their own.

DP: We all loved each other. I felt so able to be myself. And as I watched the footage, I remembered not only filming it but the good time we all had before and after. There was just a lot of joy during filming, and I think it translates really well.

There's this theme of collaboration among Black people in terms of the choices they ultimately make in order to get through the night. Usually within slashers we see people go their separate ways and get driven further apart, but here the game ultimately drives them closer together. Was that something you were conscious of in terms of how it mirrors our current Black creative space?

TO: Absolutely, it's a deliberate choice. I think we're over-indexed in Black trauma and Black lives being lost onscreen. So, we wanted to go to this place of fun and collaboration. Friendship is such a key part of the movie. We want people to leave feeling empowered instead of saying, 'Ugh, that was a rough one.' And I think Tim really kept that desire alive through his direction.

DP: The stakes were so high, we had to stick by each other's sides.

TS: And speaking to our collaboration, we were able to get to a deeper level of understanding because we're not having to explain anything to each other. Whether it's casting or plot points, or the rules of being Black, it's something we've all grown up with. So, it just felt really comfortable. It was a good space to be in and we could have these conversations about light skin and dark skin, and we didn't have to justify why we were having those conversations. We were already at the level beneath the level.

One of the great things about slashers is their franchise prospects. And outside of the first two *Scary Movie* films, we've never had a major ongoing Black written and directed horror film series. Without getting into spoilers, have you all thought about further places you could take this story?

TO: I would honestly say I thought it was a franchise from the moment I saw it *[laughs]*. And I think Tim can vouch for me.

TS: Oh absolutely! I love it. It's going to be a big movie. I was looking into this before everybody else caught on and I just recently heard there were real talks about a franchise.

TO: So, I was right! But yeah, I think you just want to stay with these people. And I think people are going to want to see different variations of it. It's just so fun that I feel like we can't stop it at just one. That's my feeling.

DP: I agree! There are so many lanes of horror, there's so many lanes of comedy that we can occupy that it does create an endless amount of opportunity to keep creating. So, I'm trying to ride this until the wheels fall off! 💀

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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ICE NINE KILLS

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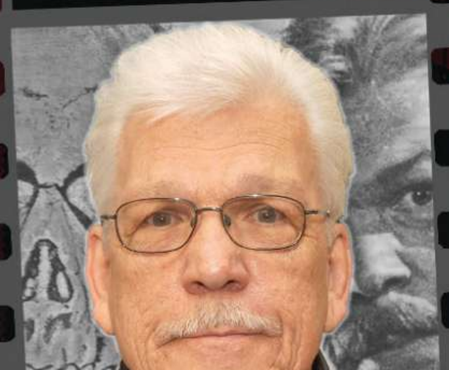
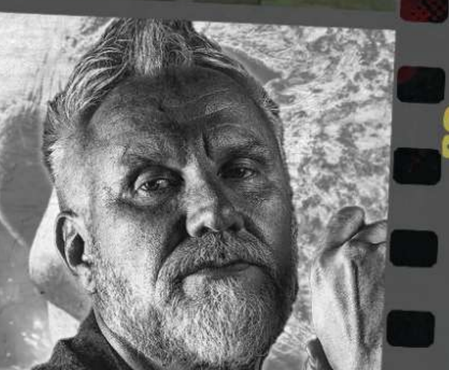

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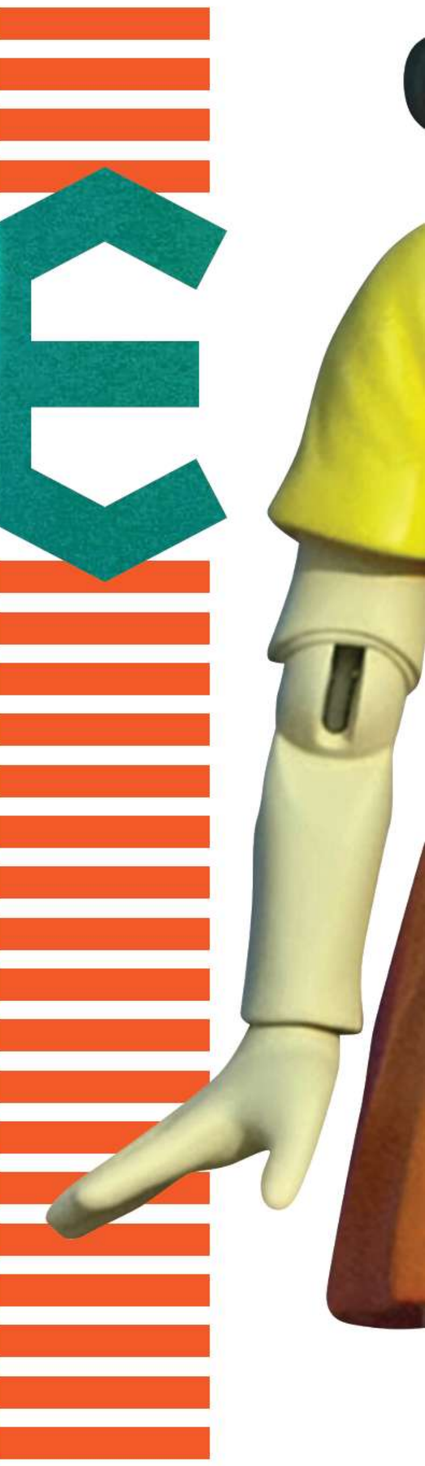
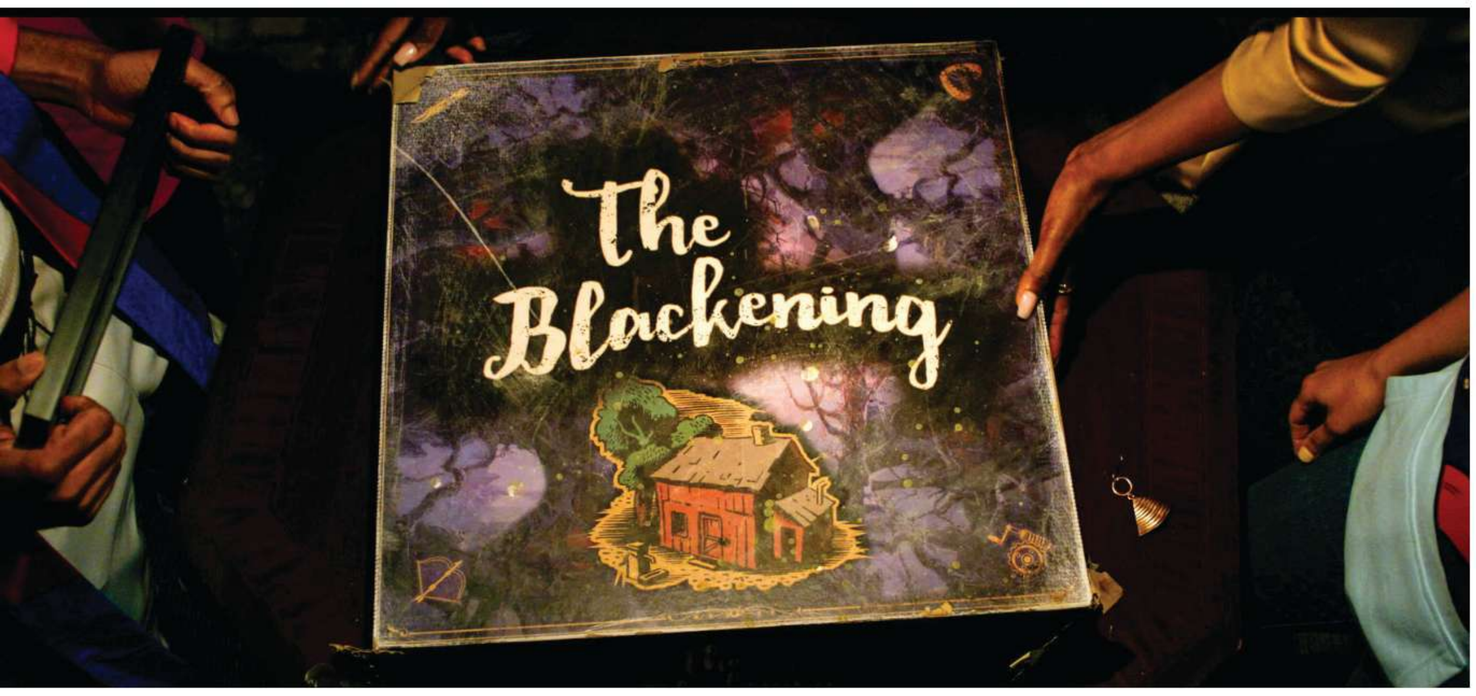
SKIN IN THE GAME

THE HORROR OF COMPETITIVE IDENTITIES

BY RICHARD NEWBY



"WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME?" Be it in the familiar spaces of the *Scream* or *Saw* franchises or some horror film in which the rules are not immediately clear, any variation of that phrase is often a warning that something terrible is about to happen. Of course, no character ever declines the ask. After all, games are supposed to be fun! They're supposed to test us, teach us, make us smarter, faster, stronger. Games reveal who we are, even the parts we hide away, not only to spectators and fellow contestants, but to ourselves. Games give us a place in the hierarchy of society.

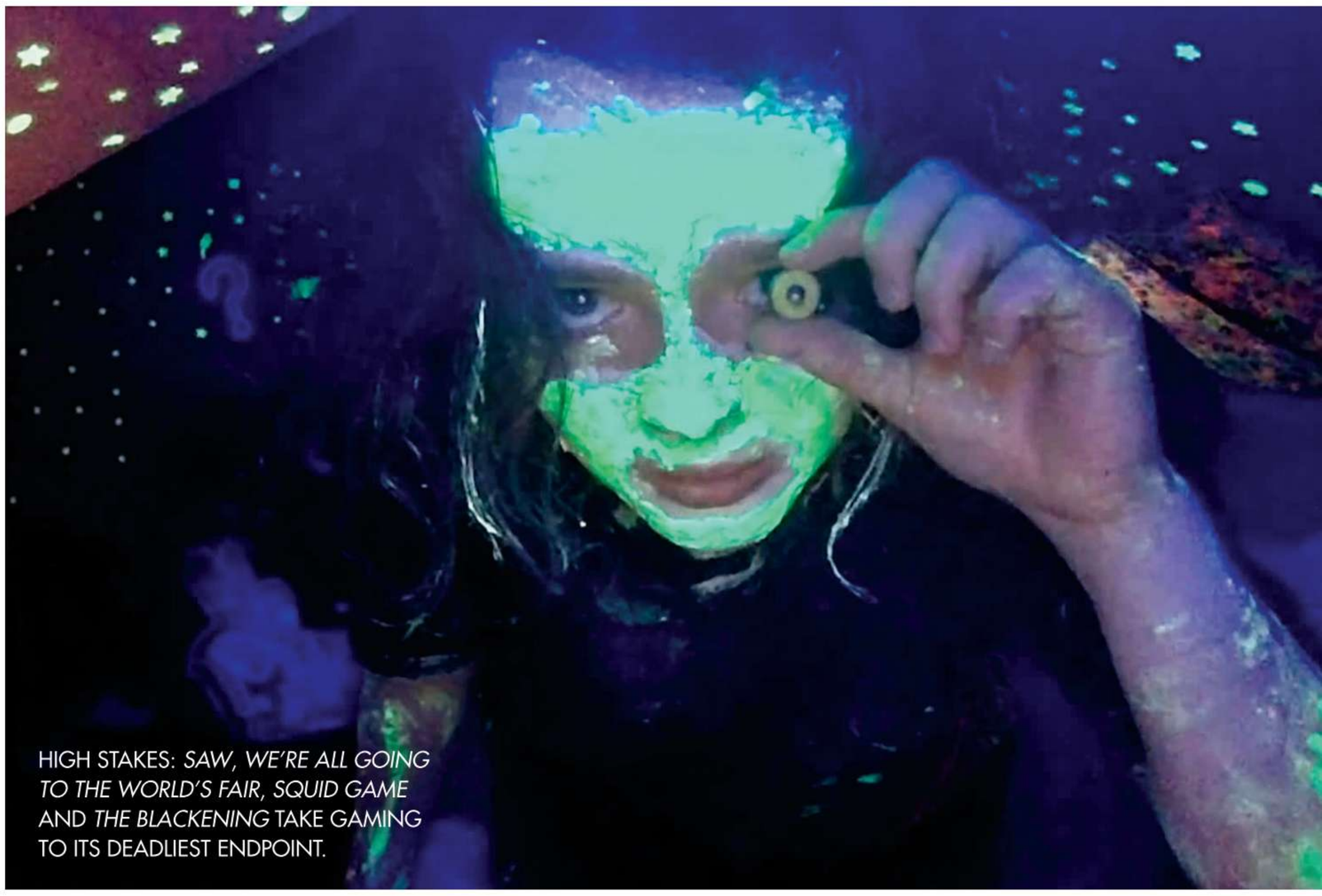


But what happens when we can no longer separate our day-to-day lives from the games we choose to play? What happens when the game masters are far less theatrical than Ghostface and Jigsaw, yet no less savage in the long run? Increasingly, it seems that we've begun to approach everyday habits, social interactions, and identity as if we're contestants in a vast role-playing game. This concept drives Jane Schoenbrun's film *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021), which tells a coming-of-age story in which a teenage girl, Casey (Anna Cobb), is drawn deeper into the world of a viral RPG. But this mentality isn't something we've grown out of as we've gotten older. If anything, we've held onto

SQUID GAME PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX

our roles more tightly, like children snatching up and calling dibs on their favorite game piece. Voting, relationship status, social media followers, allyship, charitable donations, and more have all become entangled with our competitive nature and desire to publicly sort ourselves into winners and losers. The adage "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes" remains true. The problem is, too many people are desperate to win those stupid prizes, any of which might be traded in for our most powerful currencies: money, status, freedom, and engagement.

It's a game that serves as the catalyst for both the horror and humor that emerges in Tim Story's



HIGH STAKES: *SAW*, *WE'RE ALL GOING TO THE WORLD'S FAIR*, *SQUID GAME* AND *THE BLACKENING* TAKE GAMING TO ITS DEADLIEST ENDPOINT.

The Blackening. When a group of college friends – Allison (Grace Byers), Dewayne (Dewayne Perkins), Lisa (Antoinette Robertson), Nnamdi (Sinqua Walls), Clifton (Jermaine Fowler), King (Melvin Gregg), and Shanika (X Mayo) – reunite at a cabin in the woods for the Juneteenth holiday weekend, they come across a board game called The Blackening, which forces them to engage with their black identity and put it to the test with life and death stakes. Over the course of the night, the friends are forced to reckon with their place within a culture, whether racial identity is something that can be measured, and how much of that identity they are willing to sacrifice in order to survive a killer who is desperate for engagement with Black culture *and* a social media-savvy society that ranks belonging in ways that are based around and beyond skin tone. So, yeah, a little more intense than your average game of Monopoly.

While the racially-motivated life and death stakes of *The Blackening* are a novelty within the horror-comedy genre, games have long been a test of survival that have leant themselves to bloodshed and horror. From the gladiator battles of ancient Rome to the man-hunting expeditions of Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game" (1924) to Hwang Dong-hyuk's pop culture sensation *Squid Game* (2021), mankind has spent centuries imagining ways to test the boundaries of our humanity and to figure out who or what we are when our backs are against the wall. But no matter how gruesome things get, these games at least feel separate from everyday life. They are contained to arenas and hunting grounds, and we've charted their appeal through genre films.

The entire notion of quantifying and qualifying racial identity feeds into a system perpetuated by a white society that thrives on capitalism and power imbalances (see my other article in this issue for more on this). The Blackening is a game in which the rules aren't fair from the start, because the objective is not about winning but revealing both personal and societal flaws in an attempt at cultural one-upmanship. On the personal side of things, T*he Blackening* is interested in forcing characters to be honest with themselves about who they are (rather than who they project themselves to be) as tensions rise, close-knit bonds dissolve, and politeness unravels. We've seen this play out with different themes and tones in other game-centric horror movies like *Truth or Dare* (2018), *Uncanny Annie* (2019), and *Ready or Not* (2019). I even tackled the subject in my own short story, "Bushido Virtue #5."

SHANIKA (X MAYO), DEWAYNE (DEWAYNE PERKINS), LISA (ANTOINETTE ROBERTSON) AND NNAMDI (SINQUA WALLS) ROLL THE DICE FOR THEIR LIVES IN *THE BLACKENING*.

PHOTO BY GLEN WILSON / COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF GAMES PERMITS US THE OPPORTUNITY TO REMOVE THE MASKS THAT ALLOW US TO FUNCTION IN THE ORDINARY WORLD, REVEALING THE UGLINESS OF OUR OWN REFLECTIONS.

The competitive nature of games permits us the opportunity to remove the masks that allow us to function in the ordinary world, revealing the ugliness of our own reflections. No horror film better drives this point home than E.L. Katz's black comedy *Cheap Thrills* (2013). A down-on-his-luck man, Craig (Pat Healy), faced with his family's eviction following the loss of his job, reunites with a buddy from high-school, Vince (Ethan Embry), at a bar. They are approached by a wealthy couple, Colin (David Koechner) and Violet (Sara Paxton), who invite them to take part in an escalating game of depravity for increasing sums of money. What begins with simple challenges like finishing a shot first or hitting a certain spot on a dartboard quickly becomes an invitation to partake in rude and abusive behavior (slapping a stripper's ass, punching a bouncer in the face, taking a shit inside the neighbor's house).

Vince, established as a delinquent who is one missed payment away from returning to jail, has no problem completing these tasks or in relinquishing himself to the "asshole criminal" identity the world has assigned him. Craig, on the other hand, is far more reluctant. He's a family man, a college-educated writer who believes he's outgrown Vince's antics and penchant for trouble. But as larger sums of money are promised, hard lines get crossed: Craig is asked to cheat on his wife, to chop off his pinky finger, and to eat a barbecued dog. These increasingly heinous acts are first done out of desperation, and then out of greed, shame, and the insistence of not being declared a loser. That last factor is ultimately what it all comes down to. The money to save his family from eviction has been made several times over, but Craig needs to not only prove to himself he's better, smarter, more successful, and more of a man than Vince – he also needs to be seen as all of those things by Colin and Violet, who represent successful societal figureheads.

A decade later, the depravity on display in *Cheap Thrills* feels less shocking, as the world has become less ordinary and there's less need for masks. In the age of reality TV, *Fear Factor* challenging contestants to eat raw bull testicles was once as extreme as things could get, but we've ventured

beyond that point. We've watched people fake their way through relationships and marriages for money and ratings, sell the lives of their entire families for a cable television spot, and glamorize ignorance in a race towards the bottom. We're *maybe* not quite at the point of seeing people cut off their fingers, but as social media has taken reality TV a step further, we've certainly seen our share of self-flagellation from influencers, politicians, and total unknowns in an effort to earn the "W" or the "L," depending on which holds more cultural currency at that given moment.

We haven't fully grappled with the game mentality of the social media age, the lengths people will go to or the shame they'll gladly endure for a chance to trend, or even just to become part of the conversation. As Bob Dylan sang, "For the loser now will be later to win," and it's clear that in these rapidly changing times we've created a space for losers to feel like winners. Be it the Andrew Tates and Jordan Petersons of the world, the YouTubers filming dead bodies, anyone railing against "wokeness," or those who approach body shaming through comparative photos, these people still win a place in our culture because we engage. We choose to play the game, just as the group of friends partaking in The Blackening do, and just as Craig and Vince do. In so many ways, society says, "You need to do this in order to be noticed or to have value, even if it's just as a target." It's something we're all guilty of. We turn it all into a game of who can say and do the foulest shit, who can be made an example of, or who can throw aside what they claim to believe in while still winning some elusive victory because we're all chasing after cheap thrills to give us meaning.

So, what's the endgame? Cultural and racial identity becomes a checklist formed by performative behaviors until we don't even know what Blackness (or any other descriptor of heritage) means anymore. It instead becomes something that can be intimated and appropriated until identity becomes a nebulous concept, an RPG experience that can be picked up and dropped at a whim. And attention borne of transgressions may cost us our dignity, but when posted to the internet for all to see we become seen and valued, powerful enough to take on the highest office of power in the country. When that happens, and it is happening, we've veered off-board. The structural rules of society have collapsed and we're all just placing our bets to see which individual or group will clear the board first. And then there'll be only one thing left to say: "Game over, man. Game over."

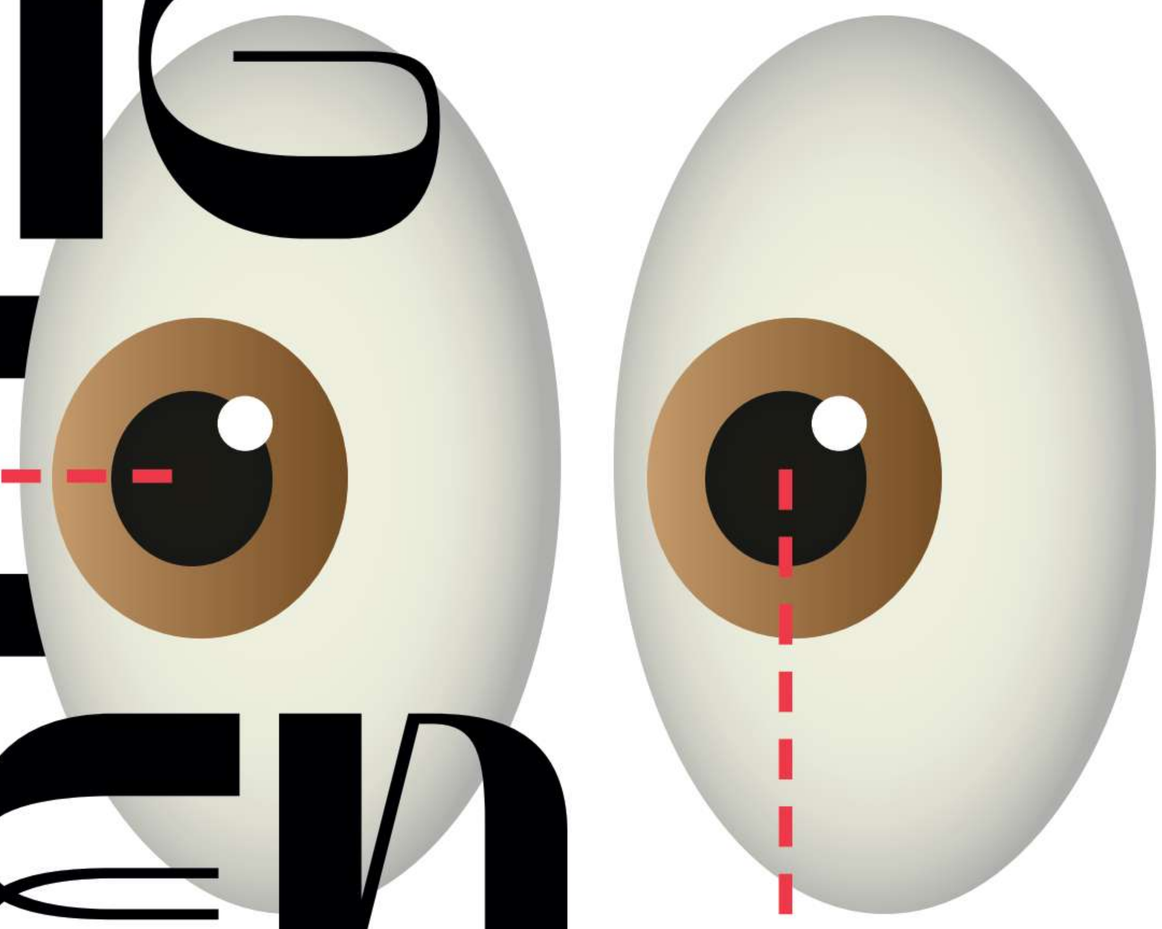
YOU LOSE, YOU DIE: GRACE (SAMARA WEAVING) IN *READY OR NOT.*

PHOTO BY ALEX LOMBARDI / COURTESY SNOWFORT PICTURES

CRAIG (PAT HEALY) DISCOVERS *CHEAP THRILLS* ARE ANYTHING BUT.

By Richard Newby

The Unseen



Navigating Black Identity in the Horror Space

It's a strange thing to seek belonging within a space in which you are always seen as the other. Acceptance and rejection can have equally terrifying results. On the one hand, there's the chance that you are sacrificing an authentic part of yourself, shedding the old skin to fit in with the new; on the other, you run the risk of making yourself a target for refusing to put on a mask and pretending to be someone else. You are both seen and unseen. It's an issue that is very prevalent among minority groups, and one that I know all too well as a Black man. The ability to navigate these spaces – to adjust our language, syntax, appearance, and mannerisms – is known as code-switching. It's a resourceful tool, but it also has the potential for so many of us to become a horror story, one in which our survival is at stake.

Tim Story's new slasher film *The Blackening* revolves around a group of Black friends who partake in a game, *The Blackening*, which asks them to rank their Blackness, sussing out who among them is the most and least Black through a series of challenges and trivia associated with Black culture. The film's approach to the subject matter is one of both horror and comedy, but beneath the surface the film lends itself to a larger conversation about how Black people within the horror genre, so often seen as expendable and existing in service to white characters, have utilized code-switching in ways that

IN *THE BLACKENING*, LISA (ANTOINETTE ROBERSTON, LEFT AND OPPOSITE), NNAMDI (SINQUA WALLS) AND DEWAYNE (DEWAYNE PERKINS) ARE FORCED TO PROVE THEMSELVES IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

PHOTO BY GLEN WILSON / COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

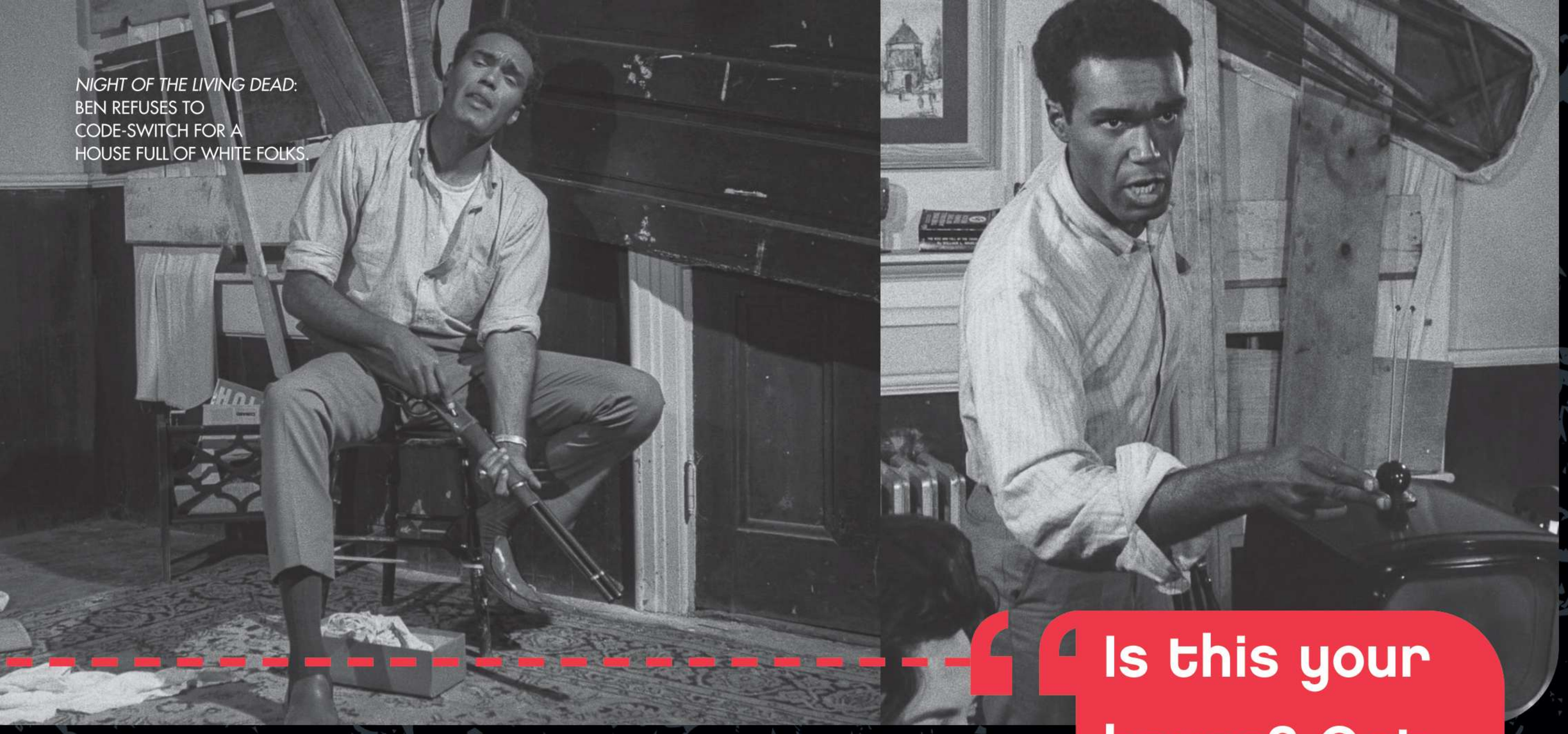
have both helped and hindered their existence as they've been forced to hold two (often competing) natures inside of themselves. Clifton (Jermaine Fowler) attempts to offset his Blackness by admitting he voted for Trump twice, a shorthand form of lessening his Blackness but also, perhaps, confirming a performative idea of cultural belonging. After all, code-switching only takes us so far, as no matter what we do that Blackness still otherizes us. It is, in part, what has created debates on respectability politics, and arguments over looking "clean-cut" versus "urban," and how, when it comes right down to it, it does very little to save our lives. Freedom Fighter or Uncle Tom, Justin Jones or Clarence Thomas, a Black person is still a Black person, expendable in a white-controlled society. Yet, we still remain aware of how we may be perceived regardless of remaining the other. We still attempt to find a space for belonging.

The result is what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to in his collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* as "double-consciousness." Du Bois described it as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." That right there, in concise terms, is the horror of being Black in a white society, and it's one that Black characters within the genre, and Black filmmakers looking to explore the genre through a new lens, have had to face.

The issue with measuring Blackness, in the way the characters in *The Blackening* are asked to, is that Black identity is so often seen through the lens of whiteness.

The issue with measuring Blackness, in the way the characters in *The Blackening* are asked to, is that Black identity is so often seen through the lens of whiteness. The very reason we're self-aware and display a sensitivity towards the concept of being "Black enough" is born from the white gaze, and the expectations placed on Black individuals based on white treatment through qualities like skin tone, vernacular, and style. So, while we are invited to laugh freely at the qualifiers of Blackness in *The Blackening* (a film notable for not only its Black cast but Black director and screenwriters), without the characters being forced to stand in direct contrast to white characters, the burden of white society is still present in self-conscious reflection of an identity that has become a survival tactic.

George A. Romero always stood by the fact that he never deliberately



NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: BEN REFUSES TO CODE-SWITCH FOR A HOUSE FULL OF WHITE FOLKS.

sought to cast a Black man as Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), only the best actor for the job… which just so happened to be Duane Jones, a Black man. But Jones' casting changes the entire dynamic and subtext of Romero's film. Ben does not acquiesce to the role expected of a Black man in the '60s. His first significant act is slapping Barbra (Judith O'Dea) out of a state of catatonia. Though the act is not transgressive for Ben, it certainly would have been for an audience. As would Ben standing up to Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman), shifting the power dynamics: "Is this your house? Get the hell down in the cellar. You can be the boss down there. I'm boss up here." Ben rightfully asserts himself as the leader of this group of survivors, and despite not being written as a Black character, it's impossible not to see racism in Cooper's territorial response.

Ben, for all his survival skills, does not code-switch to any significant degree, does not make himself smaller in the aid of these white people. Yet, when you think about the film being set in 1968, a Black man discovered alone in a house with a young white woman, and confronted by an abrasive, older white man, would be expected, within the historical context, to attempt to mitigate the circumstances by taking a step back if only for the sake of self-preservation. In this act he would most certainly die in order to prove Cooper's leadership failings, a sacrifice for Cooper's character development. Instead, Ben stands his ground, he bucks expectation, and does not look at himself through Cooper's eyes. Yet, still he dies in the end, shot down by a mob of white men that don't see him as anything more than another one of those "things" that look like people but act like animals. Even in his rejection of code-switching, of being fully himself in the way white characters are so often permitted, Ben is otherized and unseen.

Recently, I had an in-depth discussion on Black horror with writer, audio producer, and film professor B.A. Parker, known for her work on NPR's *Code Switch* podcast. Parker brought up the opening of Wes Craven's *Scream 2* (1997) in relation to how we see Blackness on the screen, a film that fittingly influenced *The Blackening*. In the opening sequence, a Black couple, Maureen (Jada Pinkett Smith) and Phil (Omar Epps), attend a screening of *Stab*, based on the Woodsboro murders of the year prior. Parker points out that for a number of Black audiences at the time, Pinkett was coming off her role as the final girl, Jeryline, in the Ernest Dickerson directed *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995). Jeryline, a convict on work release, is the embodiment of '90s street smarts. She's a different kind of final girl, one who is permitted to lean into her unselfconscious Black identity and emerge as the lead *and* survive, unlike Ben decades prior. Yet knowing the formula of the *Scream* films, we know that Pinkett will not emerge as a final girl this time around – something that Parker refers to as "bittersweet," because while the Black characters do in fact die first, the memorable nature of that opening and how Maureen dies provides powerful commentary.

> **"Is this your house? Get the hell down in the cellar. You can be the boss down there. I'm boss up here."**
>
> – Ben (Duane Jones) / *Night of the Living Dead*

Though we only get to know her briefly, Maureen is immediately established as an outspoken Black woman who not only knows what she wants, but who also has Phil wrapped around her finger. She may not want to be at this horror screening, but it's still very clear who's in charge in the relationship. It's a dynamic Black audiences can recognize. At the same time, we see her discomfort when confronted with the packed theater's horror fans, mostly white, which highlights her position as an outsider but also disinterest in what she refers to as "some dumb-ass white movie about some dumb-ass white

DISAPPEARING BY DEGREES: MAUREEN (JADA PINKETT) IN *SCREAM 2*'S CROWDED THEATER; CHRIS (DANIEL KALUUYA) IN *GET OUT*'S SUNKEN PLACE.

girls getting their white asses cut the fuck up." Her commentary offered towards the horror scenarios playing out onscreen (and insistence on the characters using common sense) has become something of a trope, but one based in the reality of Black horror fans constantly considering what they wouldn't do, a concept seeded in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). The commentary Maureen offers makes her voice an expected presence, background noise for the audience within the film, and outside of it, who carry preconceived expectations about the vocal ways Black audiences can react to movies.

After Phil is murdered in the bathroom, Ghostface takes a seat next to Maureen, who mistakenly believes it's her boyfriend, having given into the idea of putting on the costume. Just when Maureen thinks she's safe, she is brutally stabbed in the stomach, and then clambers onto the stage, screaming for help, bleeding out for an audience who thinks it's a publicity stunt until it's too late. "I have been in spaces like that where you're just not seen as a Black woman," Parker says. "And the fact that she has to stand on a stage and howl her anguish for people in the audience to finally take their masks off and see that she's in pain and needs help – and still no one gets up, that is emphasized by the fact she is a Black woman." Maureen dies because of the preconceived notions of her existence as a Black woman, and she is only seen through the eyes of white spectators, who don't really see her at all.

Too often, there is this desire to see Blackness as a performance. It's the scenario of white society thinking of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) as unnatural and unintelligent, and Black people feeling a need to use it in order to fit in with a Black culture constantly judged by white expectations. There's this push and pull tension between rejecting and embracing stereotypes, stereotypes that would not exist without white judgment. And from that judgment often comes a need for our Blackness to be acceptable to a white society, which Du Bois claimed remains in power through capitalism. Take Mariama Diallo's *Master* (2022) for example, in which a Black headmaster named Gail Bishop (Regina Hall) attempts to hold onto her position at a predominately white Northeastern University by becoming palatable to whiteness by making clear use of code-switching, which she also encourages a young Black student, Jasmine (Zoe Renee), to do. This act of burying herself – and encouraging a younger Black woman to do the same – in order to survive ends up having disastrous consequences for both.

The belief in the need for white approval, and the willingness to sell oneself for white approval, is a meta-textual element of so many Black-centric horror films. As a studio film made for mass consumption, Blackness is tackled in a way that still entices white audiences. In my conversation with B.A. Parker, I brought up *Candyman* (1992), and the controversy surrounding a Black figure terrorizing the Black community of Cabrini-Green. Parker pushed back against that controversy, suggesting we consider the way in which Daniel Robitaille (Tony Todd) became the Candyman, which was through seeking white approval – that of the white woman he loved, her father, and the white community he created art for. Is it so surprising that searching for approval followed him to the afterlife? There is in fact a parallel between Robitaille's story and that of *Candyman* 2021's Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) who has embraced the gentrification of downtown Chicago and has become a tourist in Black space, creating Black art for the approval of white art critics.

As we navigate the future of Black horror, it's worth keeping a single question in mind: "Who is this for?" It's easy to recognize Black bodies onscreen and see it as representation. But what's more crucial is considering how a project approaches these Black characters. Are we always seeing Blackness in our media through the lens of white-dominated Hollywood? Can any Black filmmaker be free from that burden, and do they even have a responsibility to try to engage with that question? Can they just have fun? Is the way Black filmmakers approach Black characters in film another form of code-switching? Another act of grappling with double-consciousness? There are no clear answers, but as we consider not only who survives in horror but *how* they survive, challenging oneself to consider the lens through which survival is permitted could hold the key to seeing the unseen and creating a freer expression of identity. 💀

WHAT HORRORS HIDE WITHIN THE NIGHTMARES OF DC'S GREATEST HEROES?

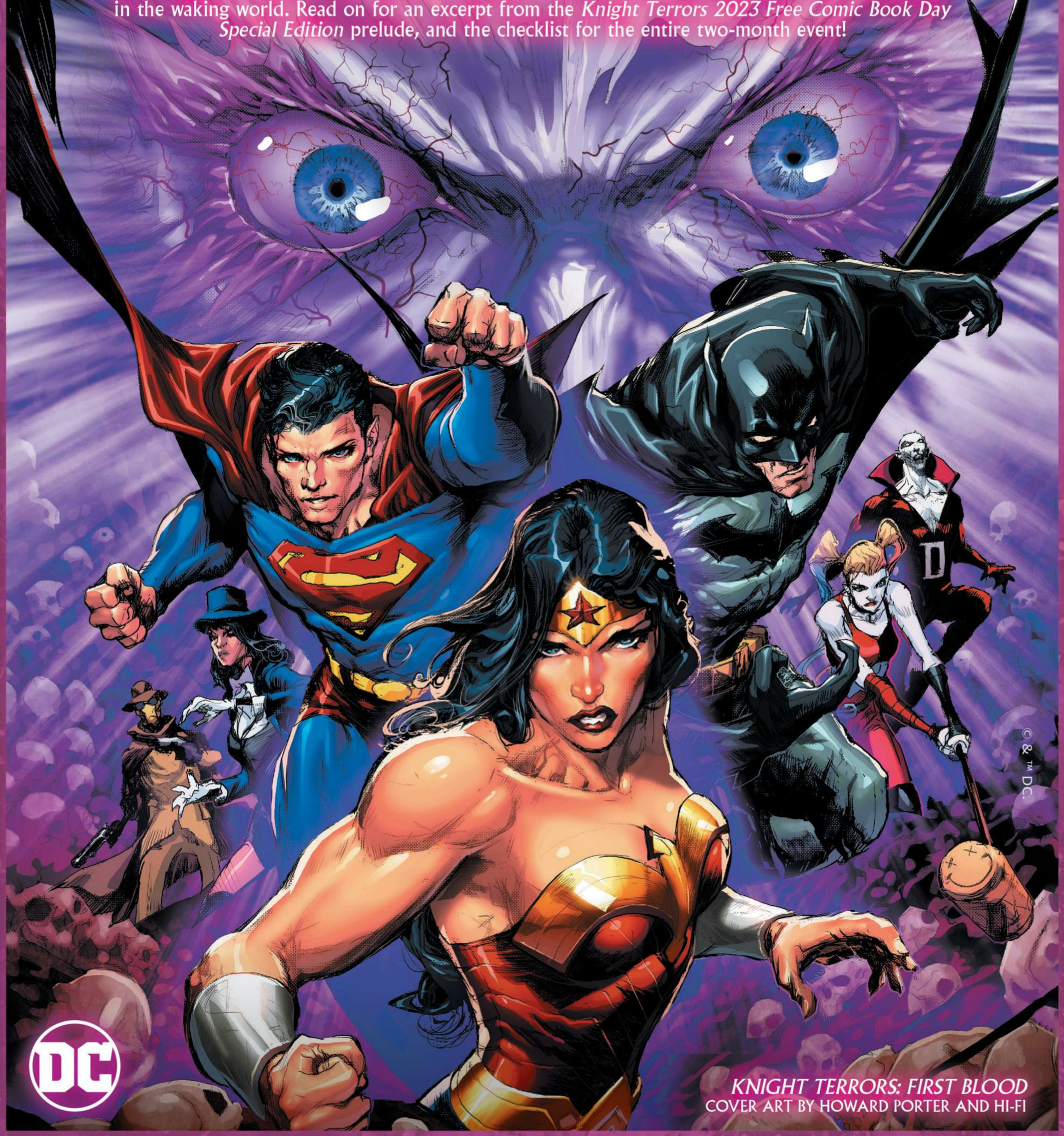
KNIGHT TERRORS

Knight Terrors is a terrifying four-issue DC comic book series written by Joshua Williamson with art by Howard Porter and Guillem March in which Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman find the body of one of their earliest enemies at the Hall of Justice. Their investigation takes them past the land of the living, beyond the land of the dead, and into a realm of nightmares ruled by a brand-new villain: Insomnia.

The horror-focused event will take over DC's publishing line in July and August and features multiple two-issue miniseries starring characters across the DC Universe, with the story bookended by the introductory special *Knight Terrors: First Blood* and finale *Knight Terrors: Night's End.*

"I love horror comics, and it's been a blast bringing the energy to Dawn of DC. Knight Terrors showcases the horror side of our heroes as a brand-new villain, Insomnia, confronts them with their worst nightmares," said Joshua Williamson. "It's a fun and horrific event that brings together all of the heroes and villains of DC, along with some surprises!"

Each of the miniseries will feature a DC Super Hero or Super-Villain confronting their worst nightmares in a "nightmare realm"—and whatever happens to them in the nightmare realm will be reflected in the waking world. Read on for an excerpt from the *Knight Terrors 2023 Free Comic Book Day Special Edition* prelude, and the checklist for the entire two-month event!



KNIGHT TERRORS: FIRST BLOOD
COVER ART BY HOWARD PORTER AND HI-FI

READ THE *DAWN OF DC KNIGHT TERRORS 2023 FREE COMIC BOOK DAY SPECIAL EDITION* RIGHT NOW!

GOTHAM

LONG NIGHT IN...

NOTE TO SELF...WHILE FATHER TRANSPORTS FIREFLY AND KILLER MOTH TO ARKHAM...

...INVESTIGATE WHETHER THEY HAD A GETAWAY DRIVER...

...AFTER A QUICK...

...POWER NAP...

© & ™ DC.

HM. THE BEACH ON LAZARUS ISLAND BEFORE IT WAS DESTROYED.

FASCINATING.

FOR YEARS, I TRAINED MY R.E.M. SLEEP TO PROCESS THE DAY'S EVENTS AND CASES.

AND OVER HERE REPRESENTING MY OWN INTERNAL WISH FOR THEM TO BE HAPPY...

WHAT ELSE DOES MY MIND HAVE IN STORE...FOR ME...?

ODD. WHAT INNER PART OF MY BRAIN IS MANIFESTING *THIS*?

A FEAR THAT SOMEONE IS WATCHING ME?

OH SON, YOU ARE ***SUCH*** A DISAPPOINTMENT TO ME.

WE SHOULD HAVE SMOTHERED HIM IN THE CRIB.

WORK OUT ANY... UNRESOLVED *ISSUES* FROM THE DAY.

MOTHER AND FATHER... *TOGETHER...*

MY MIND MUST BE TELLING ME THAT I NEED TO REACH OUT TO MY FRIENDS HAWKE AND FLATLINE.

SEE HOW *THEY* ARE DOING SINCE THEY LEFT LAZARUS ISLAND.

HOW COULD I EVER ALLOW A LITTLE KILLER LIKE *YOU* TO LIVE?

ONE, NICE TRY. I'VE ALREADY WORKED OUT THOSE ISSUES. MY PARENTS LOVE AND ARE PROUD OF ME.

AND TWO...

MY DREAM MEANS *MY RULES.*

I'M IN TOTAL--

AH!

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KNIG
TERR

JULY

- Knight Terrors: First Blood
- Knight Terrors #1
- Knight Terrors #2
- Knight Terrors: Action Comics #1
- Knight Terrors: Angel Breaker #1
- Knight Terrors: Batman #1
- Knight Terrors: Black Adam #1
- Knight Terrors: Catwoman #1
- Knight Terrors: Detective Comics #1
- Knight Terrors: Green Lantern #1
- Knight Terrors: Harley Quinn #1
- Knight Terrors: Nightwing #1
- Knight Terrors: Poison Ivy #1
- Knight Terrors: Punchline #1
- Knight Terrors: Ravager #1
- Knight Terrors: Robin #1
- Knight Terrors: Shazam! #1
- Knight Terrors: Superman #1
- Knight Terrors: The Flash #1
- Knight Terrors: The Joker #1
- Knight Terrors: Titans #1
- Knight Terrors: Wonder Woman #1
- Knight Terrors: Zatanna #1

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KNIGHT TERRORS

FULL EVENT CHECKLIST!

AUGUST

- ☐ Knight Terrors: Night's End
- ☐ Knight Terrors #3
- ☐ Knight Terrors #4
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Action Comics #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Angel Breaker #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Batman #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Black Adam #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Catwoman #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Detective Comics #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Green Lantern #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Harley Quinn #2
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- ☐ Knight Terrors: Poison Ivy #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Punchline #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Ravager #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Robin #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Shazam! #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Superman #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: The Flash #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: The Joker #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Titans #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Wonder Woman #2
- ☐ Knight Terrors: Zatanna #2

A VERY MODERN PROMETHEUS

Laura Moss' *birth/rebirth* brings new life – and a new point of view – to the classic tale of Frankenstein.

BY JACQUELINE CASTEL

A.J. LISTER PUTS A TINY SPIN ON FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER AS LILA.

Editor's note – This year two filmmakers are putting new spins on a pair of classic horror staples: the Frankenstein story and the werewolf legend. The moment inspired us to pair these filmmakers in conversation, which we are proud to bring to FANGORIA readers across two issues.

First up: Jacqueline Castel chats with Laura Moss about birth/rebirth, *the director's modern take on Frankenstein. In Moss' film, Rose (Marin Ireland) is a scientist researching a cure for death while dealing with an insistent assistant in Celie (Judy Reyes), the mother of the dead child (A.J. Lister) Rose has stolen from the morgue and resurrected. The fest favorite stands next to Universal's* Invisible Man *as a clever, exciting reimagining of an oft-told tale.*

Their conversation will continue in our next issue, as the pair delves into Castel's werewolf allegory, My Animal.

MAYBE DON'T GET TOO ATTACHED TO THE PIG, FOLKS.

Jacqueline Castel: A parallel between our two films is the exploration of internal struggles in the physical body. Both of our stories feature highly conflicted female characters who are often at war with themselves and, specifically, their bodies. What draws you to these types of characters?

Laura Moss: I really relate to Rose, and I think she lives within me very much. I came to more conscious awareness of my gender in the making of this film. I'm non-binary, and I think as someone who socialized as a woman, it was very much from the get-go about this female character who wants to create something with her mind and needs her body to do it, but is also at war with her body over it.

Rose is uninterested in her body, but she keeps it up like a piece of machinery, and then it turns on her over the course of the film. I think those are all elements of my own struggles around body and embodiments. To explore that with Rose was a gift.

What was your relationship like to the original source material, *Frankenstein*, that inspired the film?

I was inspired by *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's life, particularly her miscarriages and her relationship with grief. But I diverged pretty heavily early on, when I was playing with the material. So when it came to references, I reread *Frankenstein*, I watched every Frankenstein film. And while I totally enjoyed them, I didn't find a lot of direct reference material there. I did know that an audience expects an 'It's alive!' moment, and I tried to play with that in terms of how to structure the film.

How many shoot days did you have?

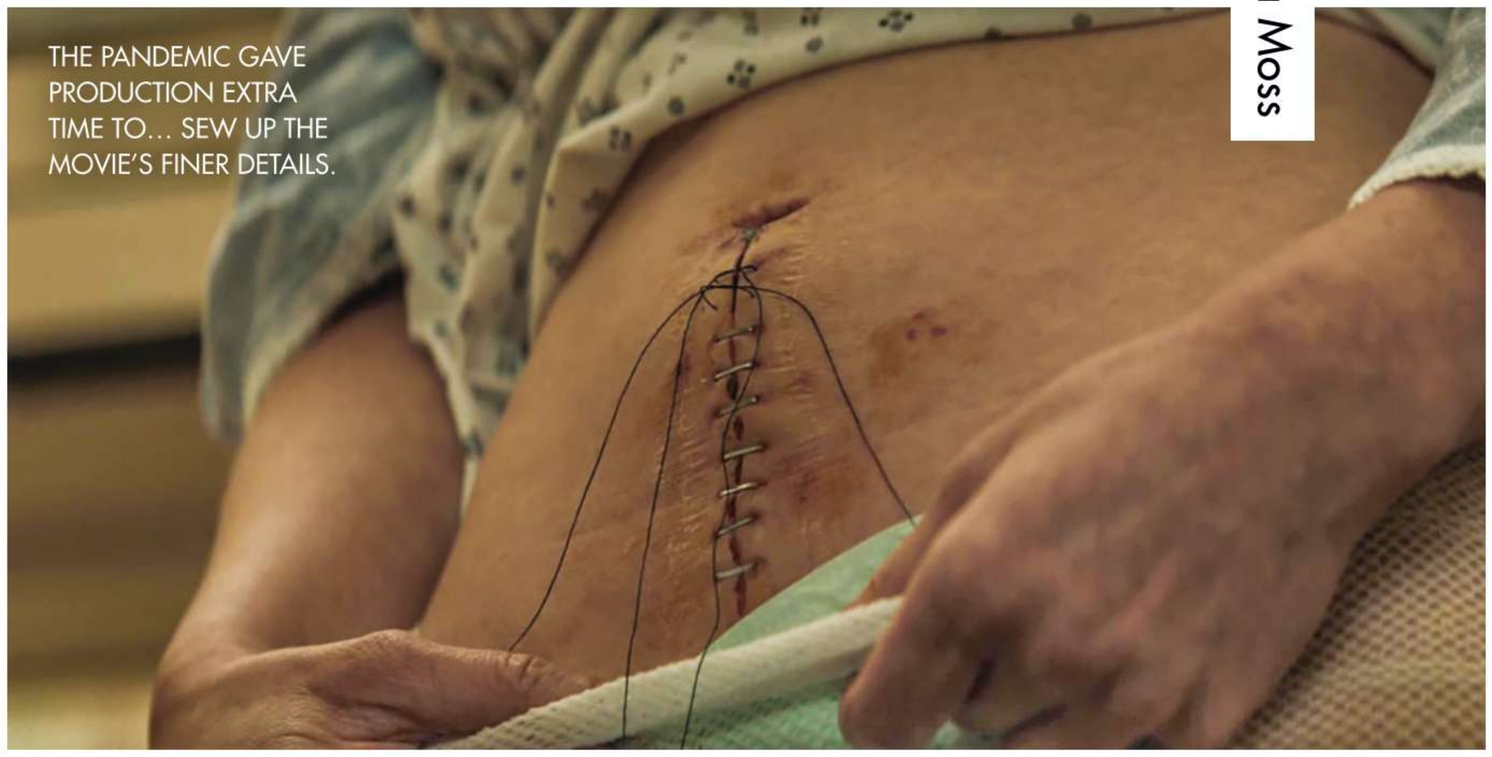
We filmed for 24 days, but thanks to COVID I had an extra two years to think about the movie, and I made an incredibly detailed, illustrated script, basically a facing page for every script page, with imagery.

That's incredible.

I had too much time to think about what this movie looked like aesthetically. As a former production designer, my approach when on a tight budget is usually to find the perfect location and move some pillows

JUDY REYES RETURNS TO HORROR AS CELIE.

> **"There is some explicit medical realism in my film, some body horror stuff that I really had to think long and hard about how much to show and how long to show it."**
>
> -Laura Moss



THE PANDEMIC GAVE PRODUCTION EXTRA TIME TO… SEW UP THE MOVIE'S FINER DETAILS.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

around. But for this one, we had two central locations: the hospital and the apartment. And we were lucky enough to have these brilliant production designers, Courtney and Hillary Andujar, who work as a team, and they really transformed those spaces.

So we were able to talk about the history of those spaces, particularly in Rose's apartment, the history of her dying mother in that apartment. And they have this filmmaker's eye toward making sure that every angle is interesting and different. And that was a revelation to me because the space as a whole looked amazing, but I was so thrilled to be able to point the camera anywhere and get richness out of it.

One thing I really love about your film is the quietness of the horror. We're witnessing extreme acts, but there's an elegance to how you're depicting it.

It was very clear to me early on that I was going to have a very observational camera and that it was going to be pretty still. We weren't going to have a lot of handheld; I wanted us to feel like a scientist observing human behavior, and I wanted that to serve the explicit nature of the film.

There is some explicit medical realism in my film, some body horror stuff that I really had to think long and hard about how much to show and how long to show it. But in some moments, I think it's really effective not to look away.

Something else I loved was the relationship that develops between Rose and Celie. These two women,

MARIN IRELAND'S ROSE IS SEARCHING FOR A CURE TO DEATH.

FILMMAKER LAURA MOSS POSES WITH SOME INSPIRATIONAL MATERIALS.

despite their bleak circumstances, support each other and grow together and create this family unit together surrounding Lila.

When I initially wrote a draft of this movie, I knew that there was a mother, I knew that there was a scientist, and I didn't really know what was going to happen between them, and they hated each other because that made sense.

Rose had Celie locked in the apartment, and they were at war all the time. And each scene was interesting, but as a whole it didn't work. It felt vicious and at some point, I tuned out of my own story. I took a step back and thought more deeply about the themes, and something that comes up with me when I think about the prospect of having a child is 'parenthood versus career,' and the way that, in society, those two things are often pitted against one another.

I really wanted to explore those impulses of creating life and creating legacy through work. What are the motivations? How are they similar, and how do these two women who are on opposite sides of that dramatic argument come to really understand each other and become the only people that understand each other? In the end of this film, they're bonded because they've gone through something that no one else in the whole world can understand.

Both of these characters are creators, but creators in different ways. I love how both characters are forced into a position of criminality in order to protect what's most sacred to them.

And I love that the action plays out over a physical body. It reminds me of Barbara Kruger's piece, *Your Body Is a Battleground,* and the kind of choices women are often faced with.

There's an auto abortion scene in the film that I knew would be controversial from a political perspective, but it was a very personal moment for me, and for Rose; she is interacting with cells inside her body. Very often those kinds of moments in film can be sensationalized. And very often I don't find that to be true to the reality of what that experience is. In a horror movie, I had to be very careful to make sure that the moments around the issues of fetal development and pregnancy termination were not horror beats.

Your overall approach feels unflinching but empathetic.

I used to be an EMT before I was a filmmaker, and I've seen, in real life, a lot of horrible stuff. And so I immediately become resentful when I feel like the filmmaker's going, 'Can you handle it?' I can, but to what end? It's something I think about a lot when I'm thinking about what to show and how to show it.

BIRTH/REBIRTH MIGHT JUST BE THE IGOR-CENTRIC *FRANKENSTEIN* REBOOT UNIVERSAL WISHES THEY'D MADE.

It feels like there's that personal aspect in *birth/rebirth*, that those EMT experiences carried with you through this film.

I went from being a medic to doing art department and some special effects makeup and prosthetic work, and it's definitely influenced my approach to filmmaking in terms of the visceral versus the digital. It was very important to me that the major effects in this film were practical. Lisa Forst was our special effects makeup artist, and she did a phenomenal job with it.

My EMT experience definitely informed my perspective that medical realism was a really important part of this film, and I knew I needed a medical advisor on set. Dr. Emily Ryan, who's a pathologist at Stanford, took two months off from her very real career to be with us as a medical advisor. And it was invaluable [see page 66]. She worked so closely with me, with the actors, with the production designers, and with our effects team. In a film like this – where there's a heightened, unbelievable reality to sell – the more medically grounded everything feels, the more the audience can go with your premise and then just get really wrapped up in the story.

It's so interesting, the 'keep calm under pressure' EMT mentality, and how that relates to filmmaking. It's not the same at all, but I can see that parallel.

In many ways it's emotionally the same. I got into being an EMT because I became somewhat adrenaline-addicted after the trauma of living through 9/11. And that adrenaline addiction and that ability to work closely with people in a heightened situation directly translates to filmmaking, and directing in particular. I think it probably does come from similar impulses and psychology as those who go into emergency response work.

Part of what I feel artists intrinsically do is to feel things before they occur. Right before you're about to go into production, Roe v. Wade was overturned. Did that impact anything as you were going into production? Do you think artists feel things before they happen?

I think any art that resonates deeply with an audience, and I would be thrilled if my film falls into that category, is tapping into some cultural anxiety that is happening outside of yourself on a larger level.

So in that sense, sadly, the anxiety of those of us with uteruses about whether we will retain autonomy over our own bodies has been in the air for a long time before this particular legal milestone. I don't know that we are predictors of what will happen, but I think we might be sensitive to what is in the air.

I do think the political climate made my actors in general more inclined to sign on at this moment. The conversations I had with each of them leading up to the making of this movie, and when I was explaining the project and my approach – this was something that was deeply on their minds, and on the minds of a lot of women behind the camera, as well. So in many ways it did mobilize some pretty great artists to get involved in this project.

It's eerie, I've found, how much those ideas that have been percolating will hit at a particular moment in history because you were feeling that anxiety yourself and putting yourself into the work.

Very often there are deeper themes in my films that come out that were subconsciously alchemized and created. It was a series of subconscious decisions I made that created this moment, but I wasn't really aware of it. And then later I can see it and say, 'Of course!'

But I think your subconscious needs to be available to monsters, basically. And that's a really challenging part of filmmaking, because you have to be very communicative and verbally clear, but you also have to be able to tap into something emotional. And that sometimes can really only be explained visually or aurally. And hopefully you've created the goodwill amongst your team that they'll just follow you into the dark. 💀

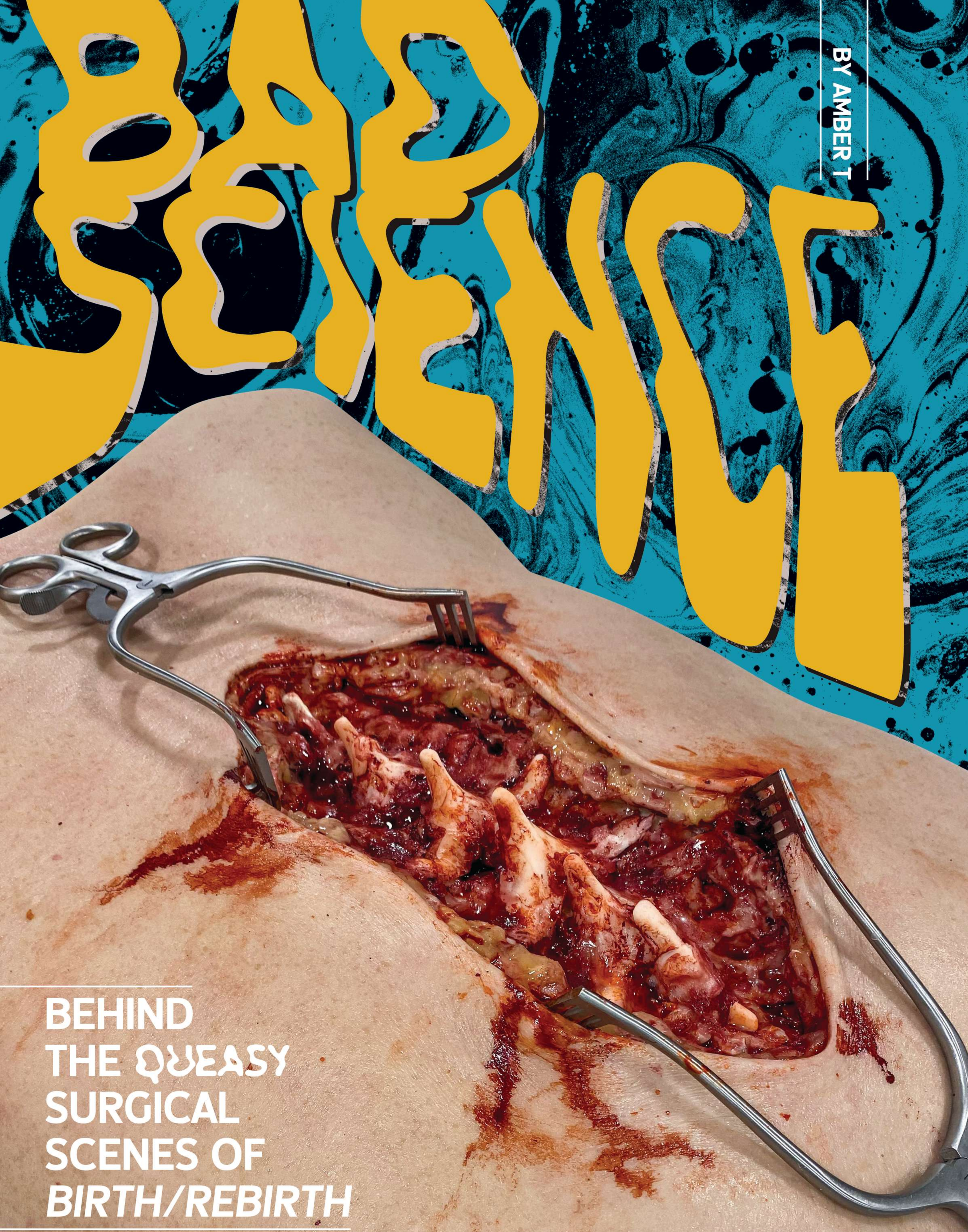
PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

Next issue: things get hairy when the filmmakers dig into Castel's My Animal.

This conversation was edited for length and clarity, and was conducted prior to the 2023 WGA strike.

BEHIND THE QUEASY SURGICAL SCENES OF *BIRTH/REBIRTH*

BY AMBER T



BIRTH/REBIRTH WASTES NO TIME GIVING THE GOREHOUNDS WHAT THEY WANT. LESS THAN FIVE MINUTES INTO THE FILM, MARIN IRELAND, AS DR. ROSE CASPER, IS ELBOW DEEP IN VISCERA, A GAPING MID-AUTOPSY ABDOMEN SPLAYED OPEN BENEATH HER. SIMULTANEOUSLY, JUDY REYES' MIDWIFE CELIE IS ASSISTING WITH A FRANTIC AND BLOODY EMERGENCY C-SECTION, HEAVING THE BABY OUT OF A WOMAN FADING OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS WHOSE BODY WILL SOON LIE COLD AND SALLOW ON THE SLAB. THE BODY HORROR ON DISPLAY HERE ISN'T OUTLANDISH SPLATTER OR A CRONENBERGIAN TENTACLE TERROR, BUT RATHER, AS WRITER/DIRECTOR LAURA MOSS PUTS IT, SIMPLY THE HORROR OF HAVING A BODY.

THIS PAGE AND FACING: SCENES OF EXTREME MEDICAL REALISM MAKE UP THE HORROR IN *BIRTH/REBIRTH*.

Moss' impressive feature debut is a twisted modern take on Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein* tale, one that asks just how far a mother would go to save her child. After Celie's daughter Lila (a remarkably unsettling performance from young A.J. Lister) dies tragically and suddenly, she forms an unlikely alliance with morgue worker and pathologist Dr. Casper, who has been taking home a little more than just extra paperwork to perfect an experimental treatment that will cure death. What follows is a queasy descent into mad science, as the pair desperately eschew morality and mortality to play God with unsurprisingly devastating consequences.

In a media landscape where childbirth is rarely – if ever – presented in all its grisly glory, Moss (who actually worked as an EMT in their early days) was committed to presenting a medically correct representation of birth, bodies and motherhood. To do this, they sought the expertise of midwives, doulas, doctors and the practical magic of VFX wizards to create anatomically accurate, realistic effects that help to make *birth/rebirth* genuinely believable despite its outlandish concept.

Ahead of the film's Shudder debut, FANGORIA sat down with a pair of key players throughout production: VFX supervisor Lisa Forst, who has worked on *Smile*, *Army of the Dead*, and *Glass*, and medical advisor Dr. Emily Ryan, Attending Pathologist at Stanford University who specializes in gynecology and placental pathology.

As SFX icon and horror legend Tom Savini attests, great FX work is always more visceral and authentic when you've seen the real thing. And Ryan (who joined the film after reconnecting with old college friend and *birth/rebirth*'s composer Ariel Marx) has seen *plenty* of the real thing. She and Lisa worked closely together prior and during filming, with the M.D. bringing her own unique set of references from her medical work to ensure each piece was precise.

Says Forst: "Everything we built was ready to go when we got to set, it was all props or layover pieces (which are placed over the actor), so we just showed up and put them on. That was the only piece that was glued down to her and was fully blendable. I mostly worked with Breeda [Wool, who gives a spectacular performance as a heavily pregnant woman pivotal to Lila's survival] the entire time because she got all the effects."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

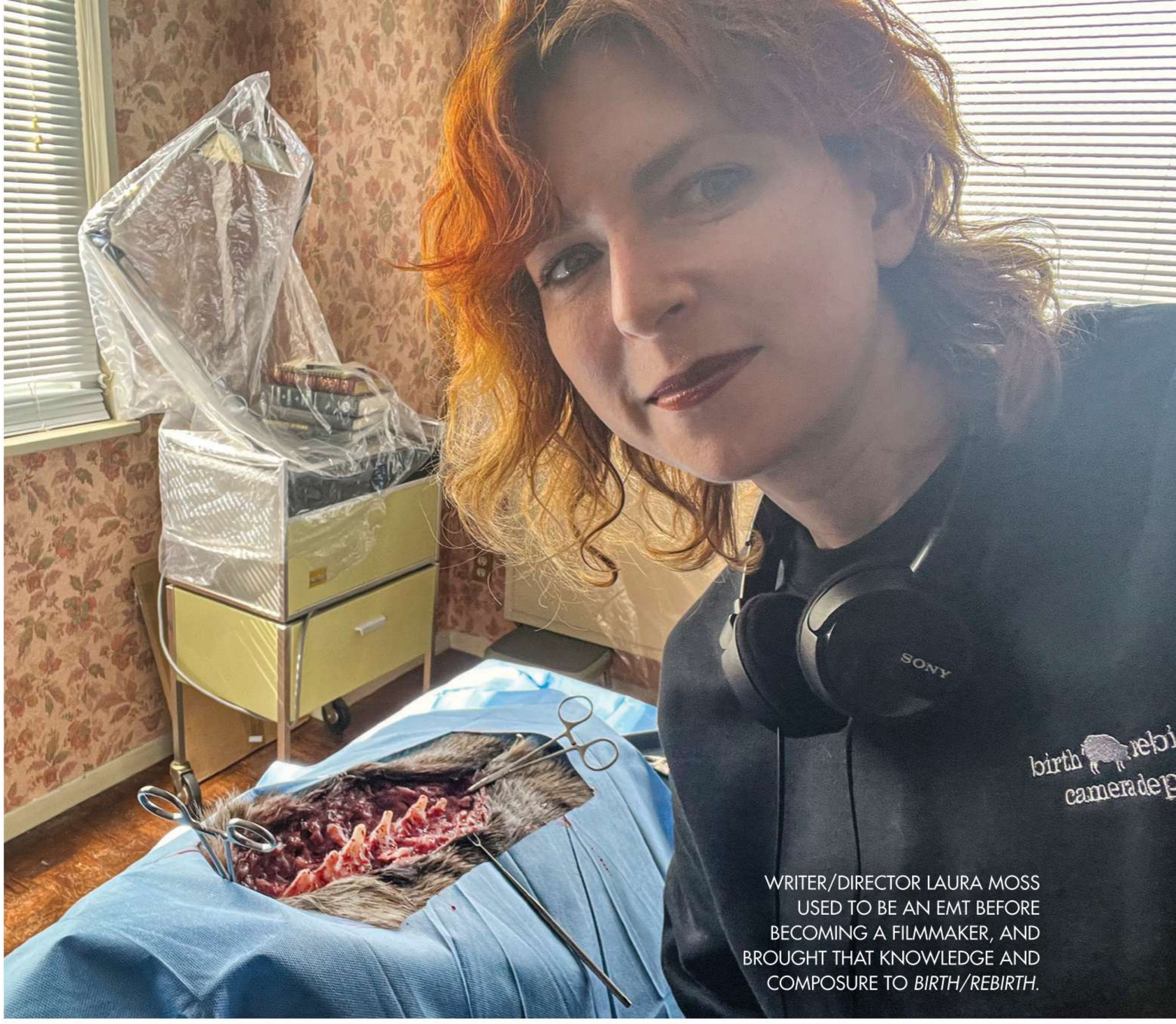
Surprising no one, Forst notes that "the biggest scene was of course the autopsy scene. I was brought on really early to start building because there was such a tall order of effects. I started sculpting and Emily was on set throughout to make sure the Y-incision and the placement of everything was correct. We had a ton of pregnancy bellies and post C-section bellies, for which Emily provided a lot of reference photos. Those photos were super helpful because, surprisingly, you cannot find a lot of those pictures on the Internet! We didn't look to any other movies or shows - all of our inspiration and reference was from real-life.

"The organs in the autopsy were actually from scans of real organs," Forst continues. "My shop partner, Brandon Grether, 3D-printed the molds and I ran silicon pieces through them and painted them with veins and details. We also had the placenta, which was sculpted from scratch, and we made maybe three umbilical cords to go alongside."

The placenta is certainly something: a quivering, meaty slab that responds to Rose's scalpel slicing with unpleasantly weighty purchase (Forst jokes that it "looks like a burger," so enjoy that visual at your next BBQ). It's an organ that most of us are probably not intimately familiar with, and so Ryan's medical expertise was essential in guiding Forst towards bringing that – and other gynecological organs - to life.

"Placental pathology is one of my favorite things," says Ryan. "I do a *lot* of research with placenta in the pathology lab and have spent a lot of time with placentas, and Lisa's were just so perfect. Even the weight of them was correct. It's a vascular organ, so it's made of vessels, which you can see across the surface."

Adds Forst: "We tried to make everything soft and skinlike, so that when it was handled it would flop around and you would see it move, but not so soft that it would collapse in on itself. Some of the organs we did have to play around with, though. A post C-section uterus kinda looks like a pile of … [*laughs*]. So we had to play around with that and take some artistic liberty so the audience would recognize it as a uterus. And the post C-section, which we referred to as the deflated belly, was kinda hard. I thought it looked a little odd, but it was hard to imagine what it looked like."



WRITER/DIRECTOR LAURA MOSS USED TO BE AN EMT BEFORE BECOMING A FILMMAKER, AND BROUGHT THAT KNOWLEDGE AND COMPOSURE TO *BIRTH/REBIRTH*.

> "PLACENTAL PATHOLOGY IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE THINGS"
> – DR. EMILY RYAN

It's not just reproductive organs that Forst's team brought to life. Stand out scenes involve a pig spinal autopsy and a particularly eye-watering forearm bisection as Rose puts her Dr. Frankenstein prowess to a rather twitchy test on her own mother.

"The pig actually came from the props department, and they did such a great job," explains Forst. "We collaborated, and I made the pig's spine. We copied that almost exactly from a real reference photo of back surgery using 3D printed pins and bars that go into the spine. The arm was a glueable piece that went over actor Sarah Dacey-Charles' real arm. There was muscle tissue underneath, and the props department hooked up wires and an apparatus. We splayed it open. That was actually one of our easier effects!"

While Forst is no stranger to the world of movie making, Ryan explains that *birth/rebirth* marks her first time on any movie set, let alone one that required her to work so closely with the actors and crew, some of whom found the realistic nature of the film to evoke their personal experiences:

"It was the first time I've ever felt that there was so much interest in pathology! I'm a physician and a teacher, so I teach trainees – it was a similar feeling on set. Everyone was so interested in the details," Ryan shares. "And I was on set and available for questions before and after, so I interacted with [Ireland and Reyes] quite a bit and that was very exciting. It was just so different from my day-to-day, that to meet *anybody* in the movie business, I was totally game. One of the things I didn't anticipate was serving almost as a translator and interpreter for the actors. I never thought I'd interact with them that much, but it felt very important for us to be having these really long conversations. The

movie forced the actors to confront their own traumas, so we had a lot of conversations about their own experiences: what it was like for them to give birth, and how certain scenes were triggering them in all sorts of ways…it feels very authentic because it was so visceral."

Although Ryan's advice on set was invaluable, she also notes that there were levels of detail even she had trouble ascribing, saying, "there's a scene where Rose wakes up after her hysterectomy and we had her on an EEG monitor. There were a lot of questions about the placement of the EEG pads on her chest, which of course were under her gown. As a pathologist, I don't treat patients directly, so there were tons of questions I couldn't really answer, and was digging back in my medical school brain to remember where all those leads and wires go.

"It was also important for me to remember where my own boundaries were – in my day to day, I know who to go to to ask for help but in this scenario it was sometimes like 'Oh, you're a doctor so you must know these things' … and I *didn't* know! I deal with little bits of people, or dead people – not so much live people. I would tell Laura pretty regularly that I didn't know what was relevant for them to know, I didn't know just how much we wanted to split hairs on certain details. So there were times when I would give feedback that I thought was kind of in the weeds and unimportant, but it turned out to be important for the development. There was a fair amount of me imagining ways in which procedures *could* happen, but maybe aren't necessarily standard of care or things that we actually do."

Take for example the bone marrow aspiration scene, which looks exactly as painful as it sounds: "Usually, medical professionals do a bone marrow aspiration via the posterior iliac spine – so, through your pelvis – but Laura wanted the exposed spine. There is a way you can do a bone marrow aspiration through vertebrae, but it's not usually done," Ryan says. "So a lot of the process was me working it through with myself and researching to see if something was actually medically possible. At first, it was going to be a lumbar puncture, but I told Laura that you're just not able to get that much biological material via that procedure, so it became a bone marrow aspiration. In my opinion, that's a much more brutal procedure anyway, so it worked out perfectly."

The medical realism doesn't just extend to body parts, either. The resurrection procedure is explained with enough medical jargon to have even the most scientifically-minded audience members guessing whether or not such a process might be possible. It's not, obviously, but it's more realistically grounded than just vaguely gesturing towards "electricity."

"Lila is kept alive using ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation), which is an oft-used procedure," says Ryan. "The apparatus in the window, I worked with the props and art department to build that and we had several drafts of a theory we had created that's based in organoid research that's currently being done at Stanford. A friend of mine makes organoids – material extracted from tumors, and then grows organs with them in petri dishes. So we made a lot of it up, but there was a method to the madness."

birth/rebirth will be in theaters August 18th. 💀

DR. EMILY RYAN, MEDICAL ADVISOR (LEFT, FOREGROUND), WORKED TOGETHER CLOSELY WITH CREW AND CAST, INCLUDING KATIE KUANG (LEFT, BACKGROUND) AND JUDY REYES (RIGHT).

FANGORIA's TOP 10 ICONIC HORROR MOVIE WEAPONS

BY MARK PHILLIPS

THE BLACKSMITH OF HORROR FORGES A LIST OF ALL-TIME TERROR TOOLS.

We all have our favorite boogeymen. Memorable and terrifying characters have haunted our dreams since the dawn of cinema. But what would these movie maniacs be without their trademark weapons? What if Freddy used a hammer? Or Jason used a sleeping bag? (Oh, wait, whoops, he did.) I don't believe just any weapons would be as memorable, because these are not only instruments of destruction – they have become an extension of the characters themselves. With that in mind, let's take a look at my picks for the top 10 horror weapons of all time.

10

FIREFIGHTER'S AX, JACK TORRANCE
THE SHINING

Based on the novel by Stephen King and starring the already creepy Jack Nicholson's eyebrows, filmmaker extraordinaire Stanley Kubrick took some much-needed liberties while adapting this story for the screen. Case in point: in the book, Jack's weapon of choice was a croquet mallet. Seriously. Thank Kubrick for changing this to a firefighter's ax, which led to one of the most suspenseful and terrifying scenes in horror movie history. You know the one.

9

LAMENT CONFIGURATION, PINHEAD
HELLRAISER FRANCHISE

OK, I know what you're thinking. "Isn't it just a prop? A puzzle box?" Well, yes and no. Designed and built by the ultra-talented Simon Sayce, this mahogany cube with beautifully etched brass inlays is usually used to open the doors to pain and pleasure. But with a simple thought, the High Priest of Pain, Pinhead, can summon chains with razor-sharp hooks attached from this seemingly harmless box, to rend all of the flesh from your bones! It's an extremely gruesome way to go, so users beware. And: "No tears, please. It's a waste of good suffering."

8

REVERSE BEAR TRAP, JIGSAW
SAW

Over the course of nine films, John Kramer (aka Jigsaw) was a cancer patient and maniacal genius who engineered, along with his disciples, many devices to test his victims' worth, each one the centerpiece of its own sadistic little game. None, though, were as memorable, devastating, or nerve-racking as the time-sensitive reverse bear trap worn by Amanda Young in the first *Saw* movie. Designed and built by prop master Tom Bellissimo, this trap was so iconic that it appeared on several of the film's movie posters and promotional items.

7

CHEF'S KNIFE, MICHAEL MYERS
HALLOWEEN FRANCHISE

The Shape's killing methods have varied across his 44-year, 13-movie reign of terror in Haddonfield, Illinois. However, he returns to his first true love time and again — the love that started when young Mikey sliced and diced his older sister, Judith. You may think that this weapon is as plain as the mask that our Haddonfield hacker wears, but you'd be wrong. Dead wrong. This vintage Lamson chef's knife is an impressive 17 inches long and razor-sharp. That's more than enough steel to dispose of Laurie's friends and hang Bob on the wall like an oil painting. No wonder Michael was tilting his head afterward — he was making sure that Bob wasn't crooked!

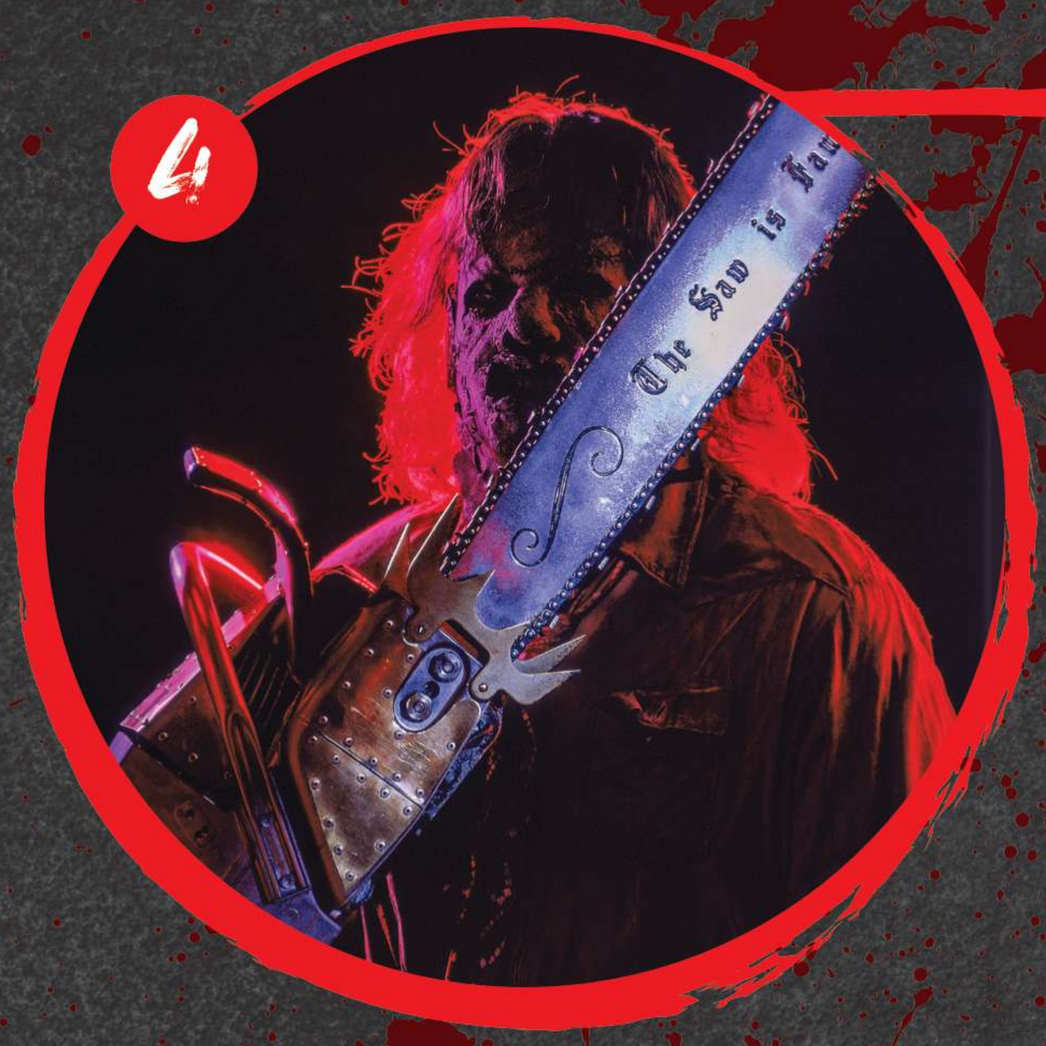
6

HOOK, CANDYMAN
CANDYMAN FRANCHISE

Born Daniel Robitaille in 1855, this artist-turned-killer-ghost met his earthly demise at the hands of a torturous mob of racists in 1890. Before Robitaille was finally put to death via honey bee attack, his dominant hand was lopped off and replaced with a 12-inch steel hook. I won't soon forget the scene in the mental hospital in which Candyman appears behind psychiatrist Dr. Burke and, using his uniquely shaped hook, tears up through the flesh on his back, causing a massive bloodbath. The sound alone sends quakes up my surgically-repaired spinal cord. Damn!

MACHETE, JASON VOORHEES
FRIDAY THE 13TH FRANCHISE

Let's be honest here. Our favorite hockey mask-wearing psychopath has a fetish for sharp, pointy objects. For 10 movies (one and five don't count, remember), he has used a whole bunch of different weapons to dispatch those horny teenagers: spears, spearguns, pitchforks, axes, knives, cleavers, fireplace pokers, even tent stakes. I always wondered how he carted all of that through the woods. Maybe a Santa sack? Does he use a little red wagon? I digress. The weapon he revisits time and again is his beloved machete. This is quite ironic seeing how he watched his mother, Pamela, meet her maker at the edge of this tool, decapitating her. Perhaps that's why he uses it so frequently, to exact his revenge on the camp counselors. Who could forget the fate of Andy, in part three, as he was doing a handstand? I'm crossing my legs just writing about it.



CHAINSAWS, LEATHERFACE
THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE FRANCHISE

What can I say? The weapon of choice is in the title of the damn movie! These films are brutal, unapologetic, and in your face! And the chainsaws? Oh, they are awesome. A strange fact is that, aside from a few exceptions, a different model saw was used in seven out of the nine films in this series. It all started in 1974 with a Poulan 306A. However, I believe that most of us can agree on one fact — the Excalibur chainsaw has to be the most badass in cinematic history! This behemoth is chromed-out, brass armor-plated, and sports a mirror-polished 36-inch bar with a killer statement engraved on it: "The Saw is Family."

SILVER SENTINEL SPHERE, THE TALL MAN
PHANTASM FRANCHISE

Hailing from the Red Planet, these guardians and weapons of the Tall Man (played by the late, great Angus Scrimm) are powered by the dead. After crushing down the bodies of the dead, the Tall Man extracts some of their brains and transplants them into the spheres. These deadly orbs become the Swiss Army knives of the horror movie world, as they adapt to different challenges while tracking down and attacking our heroes. They come in various colors and sport a variety of weapons. There are silver ear slicers, gold laser balls, the red silver-spiked "suicide sphere," a black heroic "Jody" sphere, and many more.

Seemingly, though, almost everybody's favorite appears to be the original two-bladed silver sphere with the drill bit brain sucker, designed by master craftsman Willard Green. Sadly, Mr. Green died shortly after production wrapped, and didn't have the chance to enjoy seeing the audience's reaction to his beautiful yet horrific creations.

2

CHAINSAW HAND, ASH WILLIAMS
THE EVIL DEAD FRANCHISE

Just because it's a horror movie weapon, doesn't necessarily mean it belongs to a villain. After cutting off his possessed right hand, the man with the never-ending chin decided he needed an edge in his fight against the Army of Darkness. So, in one of the coolest moments in horror cinema history, Ash took his Homelite XL-12 chainsaw – the same one that he used to remove his hand! – and mounted it on his stump, making his very own weapon of mass Deadite destruction. I don't know how in the hell he revs the damn thing up with no fingers or trigger, and honestly, I don't care. There is only one word to describe this amazing ingenuity: groovy.

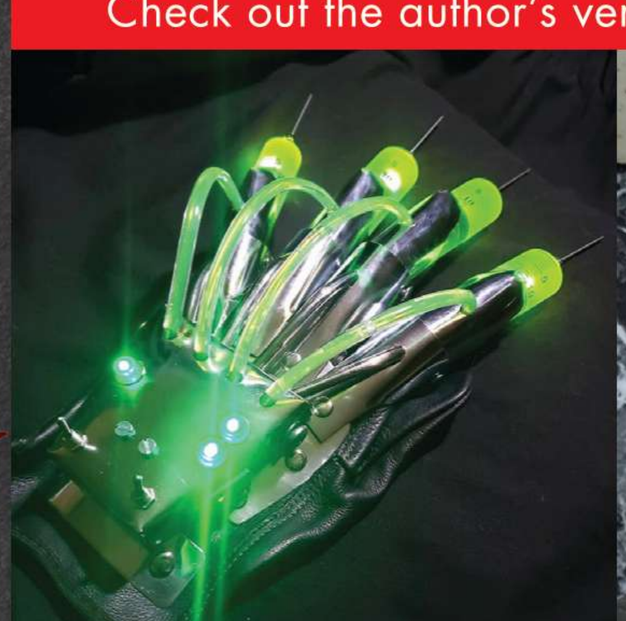
1

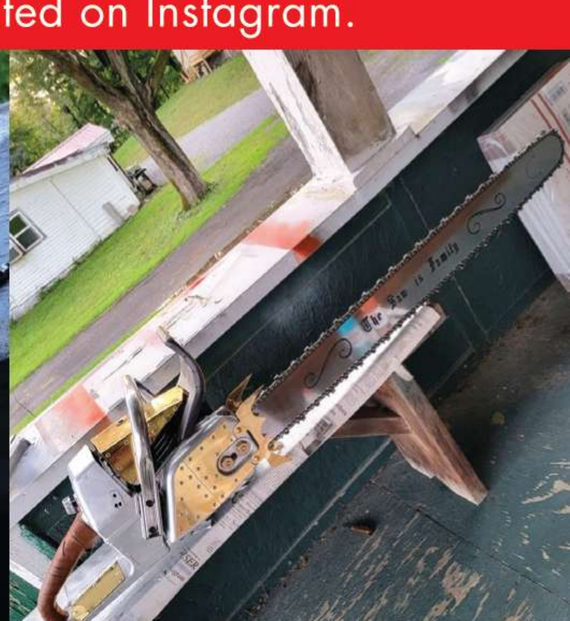
RAZOR GLOVE, FREDDY KRUEGER
A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET FRANCHISE

We all knew it was leading here. As if it could be anything else. Freddy's glove is the most iconic and instantly recognizable horror weapon on the face of the planet! Using the ideas of master of horror Wes Craven, special effects artist Lou Carlucci constructed this icon using copper, brass, and upside-down Case P210 tomato knives all mounted on a Wells Lamont driver glove. It has had many variations throughout the years.

Aside from parts one and two, none of the sequels used the same glove. They even took the liberty of putting their twists into new designs for certain death scenes. There's been a syringe glove, a spoon glove, and even a Power Glove, just to name a few! The original glove now resides at the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, Washington.

Check out the author's very metal (literally) prop replica work at @nightmares_unlimited on Instagram.





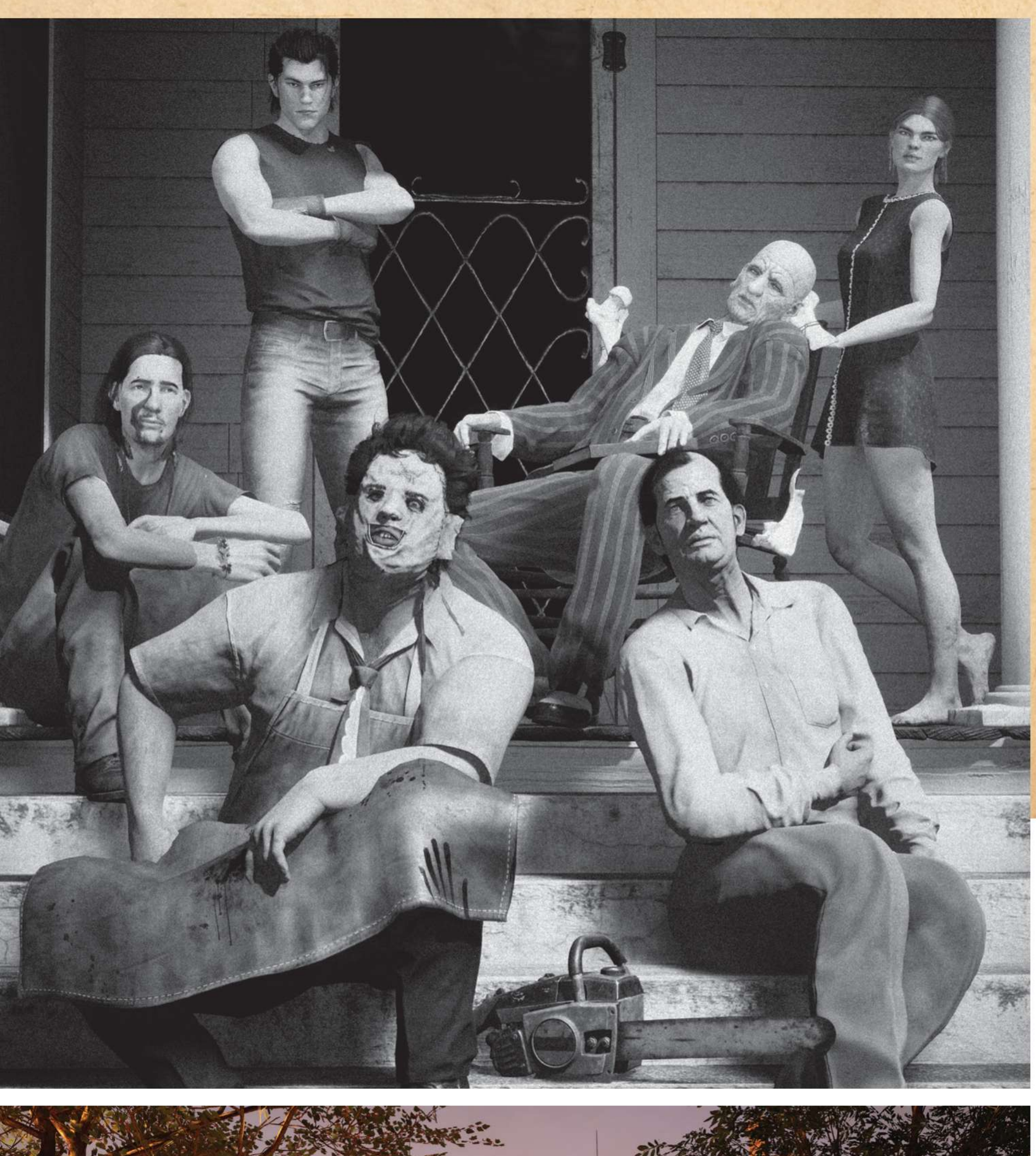
Meat The Family

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

Kristina Klebe and Damian Maffei join the iconic cannibal clan in Gun Interactive's

By Michael Gingold

A game based on true events. Gun.



When Gun Interactive, creators of the 2017 hit *Friday the 13th: The Game*, turned their attentions toward making *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* a playable experience, the source material offered more villain-vs.-victim possibilities due to its trio of bad guys. And to offer even more options, the team added a pair of new murderers to join Leatherface, the Hitchhiker, and the Cook, to match the quintet of human targets.

In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, developed by Gun in association with Sumo Nottingham and releasing on August 18th, University of Texas student Maria Flores goes missing in the spring of 1973 after venturing into a rural part of the Lone Star State to take pictures of native wildflowers. Her younger sister Ana goes looking for her, joined by Maria's college friends Julie, Leland, Connie and Sonny, and the quintet wind up on the turf of the Slaughter family, which consists of the aforementioned trio along with Johnny, whose handsome looks belie his sadistic nature, and Sissy, a psychopathic flower child. Original *Texas Chain Saw* co-writer Kim Henkel helped conceive these Slaughter

THE GAME GOES TO GREAT LENGTHS TO RECREATE THE 1974 CLASSIC, WHILE EXPANDING IT IN EXCITING WAYS.

"They have the house, they have the slaughterhouse, they have the gas station, and if you're a fan of the movie, it's incredible."
- Damian Maffei

LEATHERFACE GETS NEW DIGS.

siblings, who are played by actors with heavy horror experience. Johnny is voiced by Damian Maffei, who has essayed villains in *The Strangers: Prey at Night*, the *Wrong Turn* remake and *Haunt*, while Sissy is performed by Kristina Klebe, whose feature credits range from Rob Zombie's *Halloween* to this year's *Brooklyn 45*, and who portrayed victim Jenny Myers in *Friday the 13th: The Game*.

Klebe appreciated the pivot to the villainous side in her second outing with Gun. "It was so much more fun!" she says. "And what was especially fun was not having to scream all the time, because when I was doing Jenny, there was so much screaming, I fried my voice." Sissy, she adds, "definitely has a screw loose. She's like a wild child of the '60s. She's done a little bit too much LSD, and it has given her a short fuse."

Sissy's background also includes time spent amongst the Manson family, and she even sings songs written by Charlie in the game; online previews feature her performing a few lines from "Always is Always Forever."

"I learned all these Manson songs, and I wanted to really sing them, but they told me I sang too well!" Klebe recalls. "So I had to take it down and turn it into more of this half-singing/half-talking thing. I was like, 'I don't want people to think I'm a bad singer,' and they said, 'Don't worry, we'll tell everybody that we had to tell you not to sing so well!' I believe they wanted it to be creepier, rather than Sissy singing the song perfectly.

"The creepiest thing, though, is when you're then humming those songs to yourself all day long [*laughs*], as I have been for practically two years now. I was doing that during the mocap, and then during the voiceovers, and then when I had another session this year. I just kept humming these Manson songs to myself, and then I'd be like, 'That's a little weird, Kristina!'"

In addition to her work in Gun's slasher sagas, Klebe has lent her voice to numerous other games including *Rise of Nightmares*, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*. For Maffei, however, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* represented a first. "I did a vocal thing in *Haunt*, but this was the first time someone came to me and asked me to voice an entire character," he says. "Ronnie Hobbs, the creative director over at Gun, had seen me speaking somewhere — I'm not totally sure where — but I think he was like, 'This is Johnny. This is the way Johnny needs to talk, the inflection and the kind of patter this Damian guy has.' I think me and my normal [way of] speaking, the glib remarks and all that, were a good fit for Johnny, and they really wanted me to go über-Damian, put as much of me in there as possible, and have fun with it. That was my starting point, and I took off from there. They also sent me a list of inspirations, like Billy Loomis in *Scream*, the Matthew McConaughey character from *Texas Chainsaw: The Next Generation*; there were little injections of them into Johnny. It was just a fun character to play."

Klebe received a similar assortment of potential influences — "I think two of them were Juliette Lewis in *Natural Born Killers* and Amanda Plummer in *Pulp Fiction*" — and both actors were able to view concept art of the characters before starting their work. "They had already done the visualizations," Klebe says, "and determined pretty much what they were going to look like, or the faces they were going to use. They actually had a model for Sissy that wasn't me, so they put a different person's face onto my body, which is kind of weird. But I guess they do that all the time, and in this case, they used a model who had a kind of waifish look. So I was able to see what Sissy would look like in advance, and what she was going to wear, and use that as a jumping-off point."

As Klebe indicated above, she did her motion-capture sessions for Sissy before the voice recordings. "Sissy was kind of created in the mocap; that was where we nailed the basis of who the character was. I worked hard to find her physicality, and that helped me figure out who she was vocally. We didn't do the voiceover until April 2021, almost a year after we did the motion capture in July 2020. That was really cool, because we got to be on set for an entire week creating these people and their movements.

"I started doing things like curtsying while I had a dagger in my hand," she elaborates. "My body movements would go from sweet and proper to maniacal and intense. The thing about Sissy's physicality is, you don't know what you're going to get next. You don't know if she's going to be sweet to you, if she's going to sing you a song, or if she's going to kill you. She has a gentle physical quality — until you piss her off. You think she's a sweet flower child, and that's what she is until she's not, and then she's scary. The death scenes are cool too, because they're very sexual. It's almost like in

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUN INTERACTIVE

SISSY'S SIBS: KRISTINA KLEBE CAPS THAT MO WITH KANE HODDER (LEATHERFACE) AND DAMIAN MAFFEI (JOHNNY).

her mind, she feels like she's loving this person by killing them."

Klebe got a little help during this process from longtime actor/stunt coordinator Kane Hodder, who did the motion capture for Leatherface. It was a reunion of sorts for the two, who previously appeared together in Adam Green's "The Diary of Anne Frankenstein" segment of *Chillerama*. "That was awesome," she says of their *Chain Saw* collaboration. "Because of his stunt background, Kane was kind of in charge of making sure our fight scenes looked realistic, and he was actually impressed with my fighting skills. We were creating all that on the go, along with the deaths. Each [villain] character has a different way to kill you, and there were two victims, one male and one female, and we came up with all that on the mocap stage: How can this killer use their weapon in the most interesting way?

"The weird thing was that Johnny's mocap wasn't done by Damian; he just did the voice. The guy who did the mocap for Johnny was Dove Meir, and he and I actually worked the least together, because we're mostly separate characters, and don't really interact. In fact, I never acted with Damian because when you do voiceovers, you're just by yourself in the studio."

"I didn't work with Kristina," Maffei confirms. "It was just me in a sound booth in LA. The director and other people from Gun were there, but it was just me in the booth looking at about 10 screens and getting directions. They gave me a whole heap of dialogue, a bunch of pages, and there were a lot of really quotable things in there. I have met and done appearances with Kristina since, and I did get to play the game with her. We went to Gun Interactive in Lexington, Kentucky; we were in Lexington for ScareFest, and they had me and Kristina come over. They sat us down, we got to play as our characters, and they brought in a bunch of fodder to play against us."

According to Maffei, those victim players got quite the first-hand experience. "I'm a toxic gamer, a trash-talker," he laughs, "so they got an earful being there with me. While Johnny was gutting a person, they could hear him celebrating his victory, and then they got to hear me celebrating his victory while they were sitting there letting him gut them!"

As both a horror fan and a gamer, Maffei was very impressed with how *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* turned out. "The level of detail they put into it, with the geography of the region, the chickens in the background, the specific kinds of flowers, the time of day and the sunsets... There are a couple of different maps you can play, and there are points where it's broad daylight, and that's not usually a horror thing; most of the time it's set at night, it's scarier then. So something about having a beautiful, sunny day, with the flowers out there, and awful, macabre stuff going on is really kind of harrowing. They have the house, they have the slaughterhouse, they have the gas station, and if you're a fan of the movie, it's incredible. When I sat down to play *Friday the 13th*, long before I met these guys, it was almost surreal. It's like, we grew up watching these movies, and then you're in there, in those locations with all the details, and you're like, 'Is this happening?' I really appreciate all that Gun puts into these games. They really care about what they're doing."

Not only is Maffei a devotee of Tobe Hooper's original, he professes an enjoyment of many of the follow-ups. "*Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* is different, it's fun, it's a wild movie. I do like *Leatherface*, by Jeff Burr; Viggo Mortensen is great, and a friend of mine, Joe Unger, is in that. I really like the remake, with Jessica Biel." He even admits to digging the recent, much-maligned Netflix reboot. "I thought that was fun, man; it was so violent! It certainly didn't feel like the others, that sweaty, grimy, neckbeard kind of thing. It's more like that douchebag social-media aspect slammed into Leatherface. That's how I like the sequels, when they mix it up within that world."

Klebe, on the other hand, is more of a purist. "The first *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is one of my favorite movies, and everyone always says *As Human as Animal*, the short film I directed that's on [YouTube channel] ALTER, reminds them of *Chain Saw*. So it makes total sense for me to be involved in that world, because it's one of my favorite horror universes. I love the realism of it, that gritty backwoods quality. It just seems like it could actually exist."

And now that she has faced Michael Myers on the big screen and ventured into *Friday the 13th* and *Texas Chain Saw* territory in the gaming realm, she's got one major slasher franchise to go. "I'd like to be part of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* somehow," Klebe says. "That would make sense, because the first horror movie I ever saw was the original with Robert Englund, and it gave me nightmares for years!"

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUN INTERACTIVE

Shifting Shapes: Jennifer Reeder Talks *Perpetrator*

With the experimental filmmaker's third feature, she set out to make a "proper genre film" that shows what happens when you piss off a very powerful teen girl.

By Meredith Borders

Laura Palmer. Marion Crane. Casey Becker. Lilly Kane. For decades, Hollywood has been trafficking in stories that start with the abduction or death of a young blonde woman. It's a matter examined from multiple angles in Jennifer Reeder's extensive and innovative body of work, but the girls who go missing in Reeder's films are never just ciphers or motivation for the real protagonist of the story. They're people, often very complicated people, and as a filmmaker, Reeder seems to be asking, "Why must something bad happen to these girls for us to care about them?"

Jennifer Reeder has been making movies in Chicago since 1995's *The Devil Inside* (also titled *White Trash Girl*), a three-part short film that Reeder says in her latest director's statement holds "the strongest affinity" with this year's *Perpetrator*. She compares the lead characters of both films – toxic waste superhero White Trash Girl and shapeshifting Jonny – as women whose atypical bodies are weapons, taking a part of themselves that society might discard and harnessing it, wearing it like armor. It's just one more way that, she writes, "*Perpetrator* is very much in the Reeder world."

So what does that mean, to be in Reeder's world? Recently the filmmaker spoke with FANGORIA about empathy, authenticity, rage, body horror and transformation.

And, yes, those missing girls. Reeder's outstanding first feature *Knives and Skin* (covered in FANGORIA Vol. 2 Issue #6) is a noir coming-of-age musical that opens with the disappearance of high school student Carolyn Harper (Raven Whitley), while this year's body horror *Perpetrator* sees lead character Jonny Baptiste (Kiah McKirnan) investigating why several of her classmates have gone missing. After her father (Tim Hopper) deems her uncontrollable, Jonny's sent to live with her Aunt Hildie (Alicia Silverstone), and she learns that, like the other women in her family, she is a very special kind of shapeshifter. Jonny uses her monstrous new powers to seek out the young women who have disappeared, and to stop the perpetrator from ever harming another girl.

Many of Reeder's vibrant and uncategorizable short films center around similar events – but never similar *girls*, because each character is complex and substantial in her own right. (It's also worth noting that being blonde is no prerequisite in Reeder's refreshingly diverse casts.) Discussing the wronged young women that populate her world, Reeder tells us, "I'm a genre fan, and yet also as a feminist filmmaker, I've always found that ubiquitous missing or dead girl pretty problematic, and so I have continually felt like it's my responsibility, as a filmmaker telling stories that often feature dark secrets or dark plot points, to embrace the problematic dead or missing girl rather than ignore."

While many genre films and filmmakers blow right past the thornier, more exploitative elements of horror's countless young female victims, Reeder doubles down on the subject matter, exploring what these stories are trying to tell, why they resonate with audiences, and how we can all stand to take a closer look at this particular pattern.

She continues, "It's just that in real life, truly, girls go missing all the time and, depending on what kind of girl you are, you could stay missing forever. Because it just feels like we live in a culture that's both obsessed with young women and also completely ready to dispose of them. So it just felt like giving dead girls agency, giving missing girls agency, making invisible girls visible, that's a part of my film, and a lot of my films, actually. It's a genre trope that I feel responsible to course correct."

Reeder comes back to that concept – the responsibility of a storyteller – multiple times throughout our conversation, and it makes for this wonderful polarity in her filmography. Reeder's movies share an anarchic quality, a free-wheeling approach to genre and tone with, as she points out, a "distinctive camp element" – yet she never fails to treat her characters with utmost care. Even those few films that do not entirely belong to her – most recently, the frame narrative "Holy Hell" in 2021's found footage anthology sequel *V/H/S/94* and the 2022 Shudder film *Night's End* – feel, to some extent, as if they exist in "the Reeder world."

And both of those opportunities came around, in part, because of COVID.

"*Perpetrator* was written after when I was touring around with *Knives and Skin*, so I was ready to go with *Perpetrator* and thought that I was going to shoot it in 2020. Well, we all know what happened in 2020, and

> **"Giving dead girls agency, giving missing girls agency, making invisible girls visible, that's a part of my film, and a lot of my films, actually."**
>
> - Jennifer Reeder

LEFT TO RIGHT:
THE PERPETRATOR, AND THE
POTENTIALLY PERPETRATED UPON.

then even in 2021, it just wasn't quite ready to go because of this scope of the project," Reeder says. She was "itching" to shoot, but the unexpected delay brought unexpected prospects.

"When the opportunity to do a section of *V/H/S* came up, I liked the idea of being part of an already beloved horror franchise. I got the blessing from David Bruckner. He had stepped off my section to do *Hellraiser*, and I thought, 'Oh, that's interesting to inherit.'" Reeder rewrote Bruckner's script and shot the segment in Toronto, an experience that taught her that, "yes, I can do these other things, but that doesn't mean that I can't become part of a train that's already left the station and still make my mark in that regard."

She next made her mark on *Night's End*, a claustrophobic apartment haunter written by Brett Neveu that feels especially unexpected from Reeder. Which was, it turns out, kind of the point. "I get sent a lot of scripts that are already mystical teen noirs, and I just feel like, 'That's my jam.' Unless it's way better than I can do, then I'm going to do that myself. So oftentimes, what I'm looking for is something that's really different from what I have done."

So a story about a grown man felt compelling to her, a different character from those she typically studies, while still "really doing what I think I do well, which is thinking about him being in a transitional part of his life, him being really vulnerable, him having a complicated relationship as a parent, all the stuff that I feel like I am good at."

Vulnerabilities, complicated filial and parental relationships, and especially transformation all certainly stand out as essential concerns in Reeder's work, with *Perpetrator* the most recent movie to sift through these

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

SHAPESHIFTING'S A MESSY BUSINESS, AS JONNY (KIAH MCKIRNAN) SHOWS HERE.

ideas and more. Of course, transformation has a somewhat more literal definition in a film about a teenage shapeshifter. But "they're not werewolves or vampires," Reeder clarifies. "It's a very particular kind of shapeshifting, and that word 'shapeshift' can really mean very specific things to specific people."

To Kiah McKirnan, who absolutely devours in the role of Jonny, the word does indeed mean something specific. "Something that she brought in terms of her personal provenance, her personal story that I thought was so striking and made it obvious that she was the one for this role: she said that as a woman who is of mixed race, she felt like the shapeshifter narrative spoke to that aspect of her life in a very profound, meaningful way, a productive way, a curious way."

And then there's Maggie Snyder, the assistant editor who related in an entirely different way to the idea of a young woman shapeshifting into who she was meant to be all along. "The idea that transitioning and shapeshifting and embracing your authentic self felt like it was directly in line with her experience as a trans woman, that felt so meaningful because, of course, I didn't set out to make something that would cover all sorts of transitions or all sorts of identities that were really complicated, but between Kiah saying as a mixed race woman that this feels authentic to her, and then for a trans woman to say, 'This feels authentic to me' in a film that, from the outside, is lots of things to lots of people, that was really meaningful."

Reeder's also interested in the transformations of self that happen at every major juncture of our lives, the sort of inner change that feels painful and awkward in the moment yet is utterly crucial to real growth.

"Coming of age has been an ongoing theme," Reeder acknowledges of her filmography, "usually trying to present young people who are in a biological coming of age, truly transitioning, and then in parallel to adults who are having a second or third or fourth coming of age. I just think that on the one hand, we expect people to change and evolve, and yet we use words like 'midlife crisis' to describe what could simply be a coming of age that seems, from the outside, really clunky and mistake-making. But I think through making mistakes is how we learn and how we can change."

Mistakes abound from the teens and adults in *Perpetrator*, with Jonny's uncontrollable urges bumping up against the hardly more tempered responses from the adults in her life, played by Silverstone, Hopper, Chris Lowell, and Melanie Liburd. Silverstone is marvelous as Aunt Hildie, whose

ALICIA SILVERSTONE KNEW "EXACTLY HOW TO SEW HERSELF" INTO THE ROLE OF JONNY'S AUNT HILDIE, INSPIRED IN PART BY CATHERINE DENEUVE IN *THE HUNGER*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

icy elegance is inspired by Catherine Deneuve in 1983's *The Hunger*. The actress's presence feels almost like meta casting, having begun her impressive career playing the bad girl in '90s projects like *The Crush* and a series of Aerosmith music videos before going onto superstar status with *Clueless*. The "girl gone wild" is a concept that Reeder examines quite deliberately in both *Knives and Skin* and *Perpetrator*.

"I started thinking about the language that we use towards young women who simply have agency over their life, and instead of saying, 'Wow, look at her, look at her free spirit, she has agency over her life,' we say she is wild and out of control, and that is language that's not meant to be uplifting," she points out.

Reeder actually had a character in mind for Silverstone in *Knives and Skin* after seeing her play "small but memorable" roles in 2017's *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and 2019's *The Lodge*, before eventually casting her in *Perpetrator*. "So I knew that she had done some really dark roles and there was always a chance that this would not feel like a good fit for her, but when she wanted to talk to me about the part, it was just so clear that she would know exactly how to sew herself into this role."

Aunt Hildie introduces Jonny to her otherworldly inheritance: a mythical spell called Forevering, which allows the women of Jonny's family to "feel all the feelings" of those around them. It's beautiful in theory but bloody, messy and violent in practice, making *Perpetrator* the most straightforward horror film Reeder has yet written. Jonny's supernatural empathy allows her to help those who need her strength – while also changing her body in inhuman ways, and suffusing her with an almost feral rage.

A less perceptive witness to the human condition might argue that empathy and rage don't often go hand in hand, but Reeder makes a strong case for their coupling.

"We still live in a world where people are afraid of electing a woman to the US presidency for fear that emotions will get the better of her," she says. "We're still, as women, reduced down to our emotional reactions to the world, which is entirely absurd and diminishes us as people, as humans."

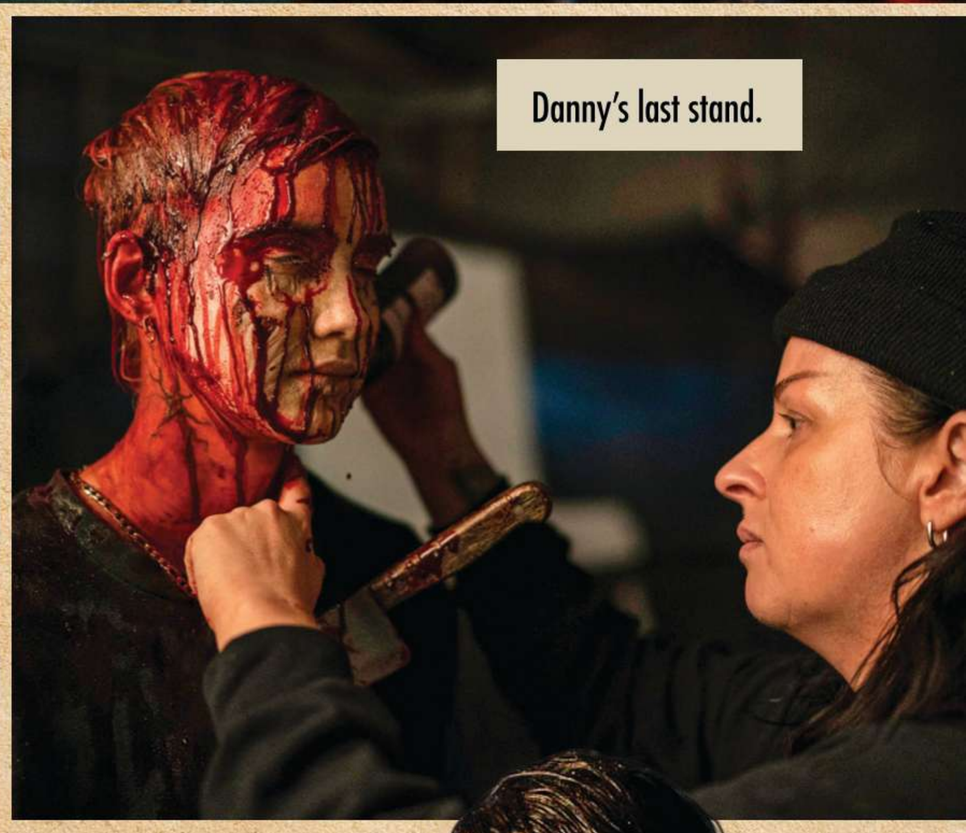
So Jonny's Forevering is a way of wielding what others might consider her weakness. Her emotions are her superpower. They are, in fact, *our* superpower as women, Reeder argues. "I think that not just in this film, but certainly in real life, real change happens when women in particular get really, really angry. So, fine, yes, you should be afraid of the over-emotional woman. Because that's a very powerful tool." 💀

WE HAVE FUN HERE! MCKIRNAN BEHIND THE SCENES (YET IN FRONT OF THE BLOOD-SOAKED TARP).

EVIL DEAD RISE

Mommy really does love being with the maggots.

Every drop of blood needs to be perfect.



Danny's last stand.

Beth ready to fight back.

Try not to dribble.

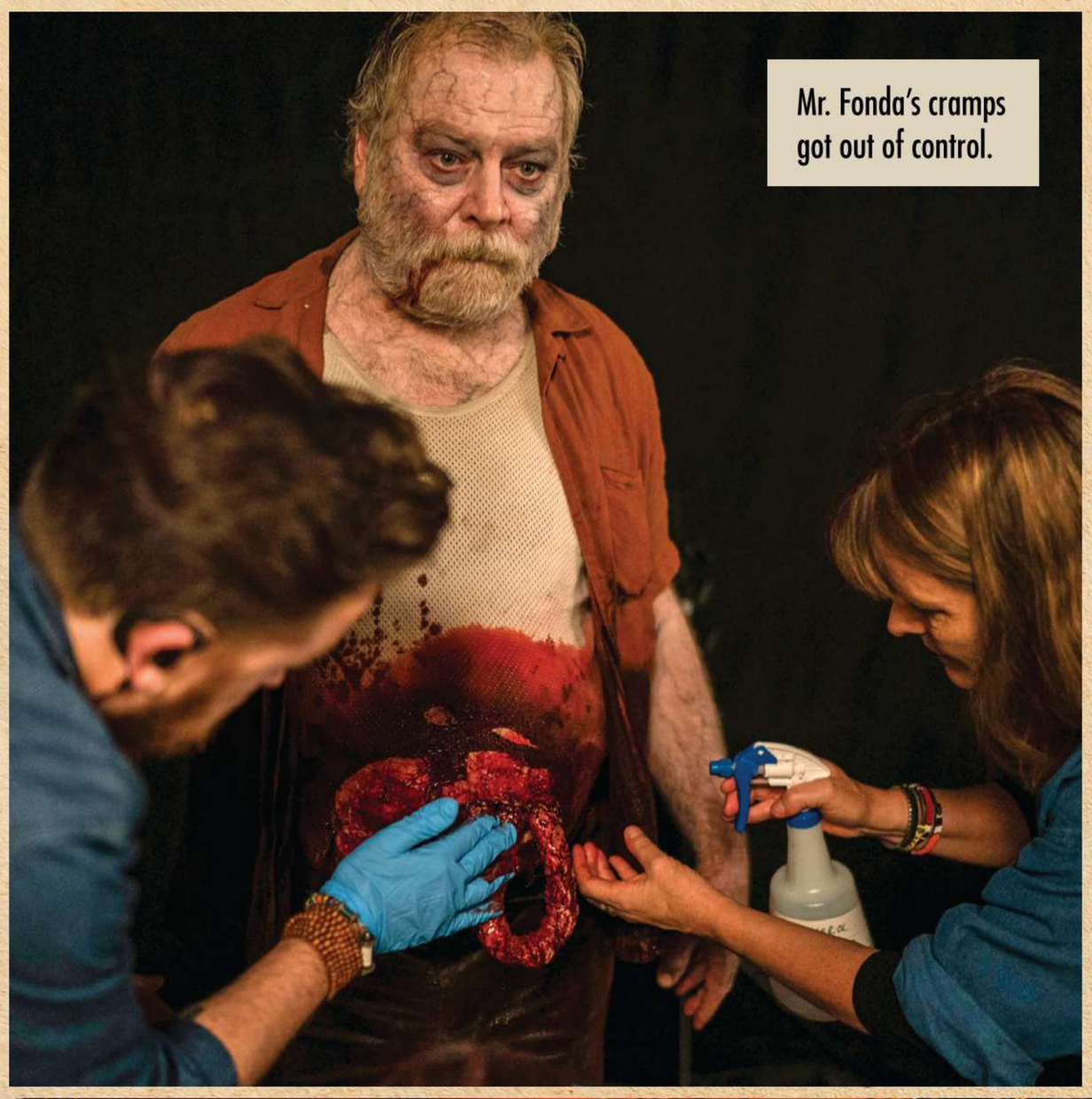
Pre-bath touch ups are a must.

All smiles creating a monster.

Fine details make Ellie the ultimate Deadite.

The SCREAM to end all SCREAMS.

PHOTOS BY KIRSTY GRIFFIN & MATT KLITSCHER / COURTESY WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT INC.



Mr. Fonda's cramps got out of control.

"What are YOU looking at, hun?"

Fear of the blood flood that's coming.

Beth ready for action.

Moving making magic tricks.

The Book sees all.

Cheeto vomit rocks!

So very ready for her close-up.

PHOTOS BY KIRSTY GRIFFIN / COURTESY WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT INC.

THAT TIME JAMIE LEE CURTIS COULD HAVE FACED KILLER BUNNIES

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

This is going to be something of a shaggy-rabbit story, but rest assured, that headline does have a punchline. But first, a brief history of one of the silliest entries ever in my favorite horror subgenre, the nature-run-amok film.

That movie is 1972's *Night of the Lepus*, part of a wave of killer-animal flicks to follow in the wake of 1971's sleeper-hit rat-attack saga *Willard*, and the first to exploit humankind's deep-seated fear of … bunnies. The credited source material is *The Year of the Angry Rabbit*, a 1964 novel by outspoken Australian political satirist Russell Braddon. His story concerns Aussie prime minister Kevin "Ella" Fitzgerald, who spearheads the development of a virus called Supermyx to put down an impending rabbit epidemic. When it turns out to be lethal to humans, Fitzgerald uses Supermyx to hold the rest of the world hostage and end warfare — but unfortunately, the virus doesn't kill the rabbit population at home, instead turning them into vicious killers and then oversized monsters.

Angry Rabbit was published in the U.S. in 1965, and the movie rights were snapped up by 20th Century-Fox. Michael Ritchie, then a TV stalwart who had made a successful entrée into theatrical features with the Robert Redford vehicle *Downhill Racer*, was first attached to direct. When studio president Richard D. Zanuck lost his job, the project went with him, and was ultimately sold to MGM. The location was changed from Australia to America, among many other alterations; as Ritchie (who went on to helm *The Bad News Bears* and *Fletch*, among others) told Michael Walsh in Vancouver's *The Province*, "All the politics, all the satire, all the humor was taken out, all the characters changed and what was left was the worst movie ever made."

The film went into production in January 1972 on Arizona locations as a straight-up horror show called *Rabbits* (later rechristened *Night of the Lepus* when MGM wisely decided on a title and ad campaign obscuring the nature of its creatures). The scenario is the standard do-not-tamper-with-the-natural-order stuff: Scientists Roy and Gerry Bennett (Stuart Whitman and Janet Leigh) are tasked with finding a way to control the exploding bunny population in a rural area of the Southwest, and begin conducting hormone experiments on furry test subjects. Thanks to the meddling of their little daughter Amanda (Melanie Fullerton), one of the critters escapes into the wild, and soon there's a whole herd of oversized hoppers seeking to devour more than carrots.

Playing this silly idea with ill-advised seriousness was a team of filmmakers and actors whose chief experience was in Westerns: producer A.C. Lyles, director William F. Claxton (who had over 50 episodes of *Bonanza* under his belt) and co-stars Rory Calhoun, Paul Fix and Chuck Hayward (John Wayne's longtime stunt double). DeForest Kelley, who plays the president of the local college, also had a number of oaters on his résumé, though of course was better known as Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy on the original *Star Trek*. (Coincidentally, Fix had played the *Enterprise*'s chief medical officer on *Trek*'s second pilot episode "Where No Man Has Gone Before.") One of the writers was Gene R. Kearney, who co-scripted Curtis Harrington's 1967 psychothriller *Games*; the other is billed as Don Holliday, who appears to have no other screenwriting credits, though that pseudonym was used by several authors on sexy paperbacks throughout the 1960s, including *The Man from C.A.M.P.* gay spy-adventure series.

The *Lepus* ensemble also included 350 rabbits playing both the normal kind and the enlarged mutations, rampaging through miniature sets (on which food pellets were used to get them to literally chew the scenery). Production had to be halted for a week when "Mildred," one of the star bunnies, became pregnant, and the genders were separated thereafter to prevent any further unwanted multiplying. Leigh also revealed to journalist Sue Rhodes (Calhoun's wife) in *The Australian Women's Weekly* that an animal other than the film's central threat freaked her out on set. "I was terrified of those bats" seen in a laboratory scene. "The script called for me to pick one up. I just couldn't do it. And then one of them got out of the cage and started flying all over the place. I thought I was going to scream." In the end, Claxton reassigned the bat-handling job to Whitman.

Toward the end of production, Leigh was visited on the set by her daughters by former husband Tony Curtis: 15-year-old Kelly and 13-year-old Jamie Lee. This was when, presumably, she was offered the opportunity for the girls to take small parts in *Lepus*. As Leigh revealed to syndicated columnist Jack O'Brian, she turned that offer down cold. "I won't let them even see horror movies," she stated.

Perhaps that's why, as Jamie Lee would later confess, genre films scare her too much — though six years later, she would take part in a certain John Carpenter chiller that launched her toward stardom. But just think: Jamie Lee Curtis could have started her horror career in *Night of the Lepus* instead of *Halloween*!

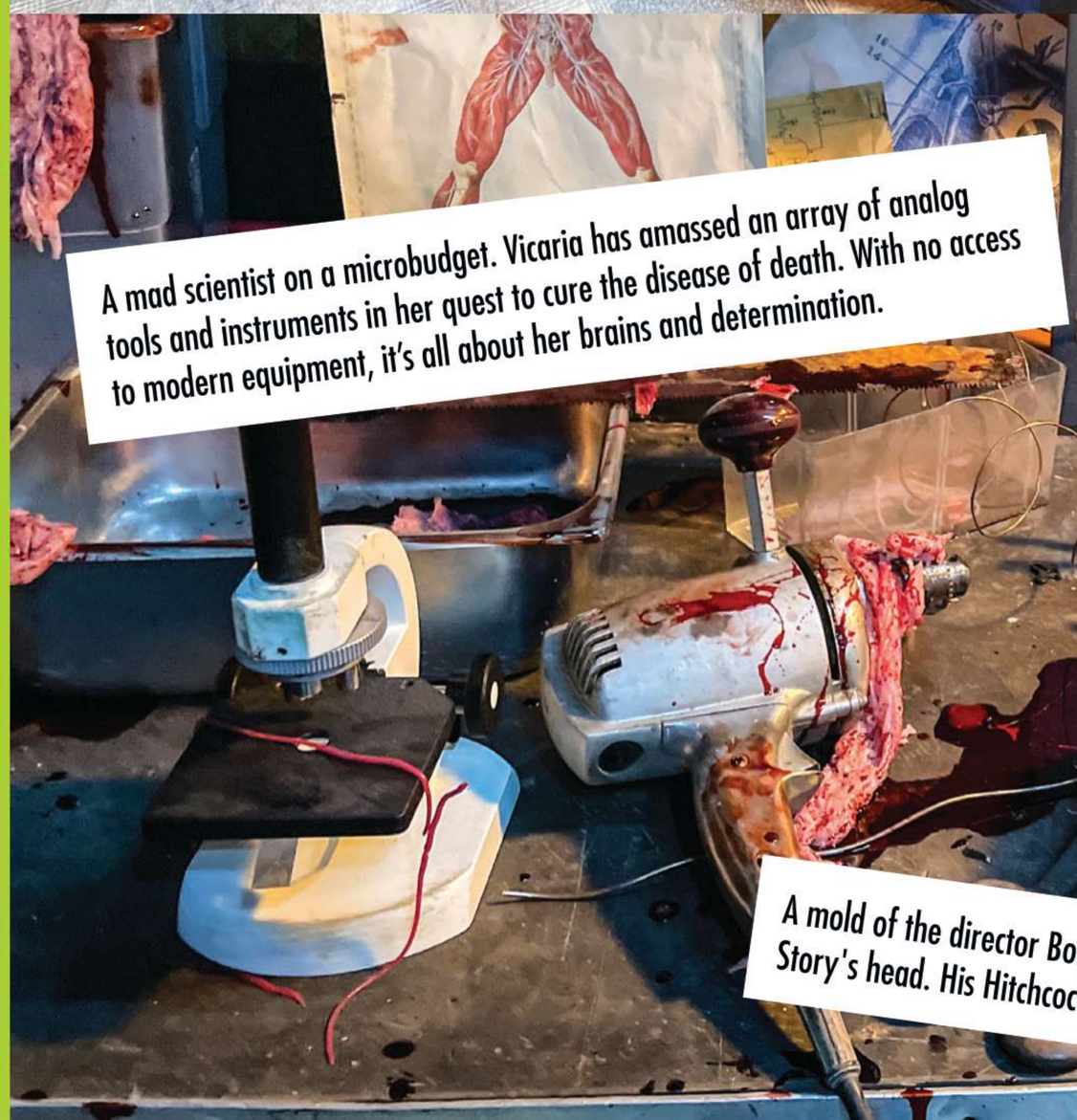
THE ANGRY BLACK GIRL AND HER MONSTER

Of all the *Frankenstein* riffs coming down the pike this year, Bomani J. Story's *The Angry Black Girl and Her Monster* is the first one out of the gate, and we've got production designer Mark Bankins and SFX Makeup Head Christina Kortum spilling some exclusive guts for you. You can see all this great work on VOD now.

BY MARK BANKINS & CHRISTINA KORTUM

Vicaria's secret lab, a junk-punk paradise outfitted with local scrap: salvaged electrical gear, modified electronic toys, and old sewing patterns.

The original concept art went through several iterations before this version by Tristan Schane. From this we had to come up with a practical design that was fast to apply, cost effective, and modify it to fit the actor who had a very different face shape.



A mad scientist on a microbudget. Vicaria has amassed an array of analog tools and instruments in her quest to cure the disease of death. With no access to modern equipment, it's all about her brains and determination.

A mold of the director Bomani J. Story's head. His Hitchcock cameo.

Measure twice, cut once! Vicaria's lab is peppered with concepts, prototypes, inspiration -- all with a sense of mad-genius urgency.

We sourced this gruesome silicone piece from Tinsley Studio. We hand laid the hairline on the day with lace brows.

We took the concept of Vicaria only having access to found supplies all the way to the bone with our surgery body. Easter egg in the film…. we lifecast the director the night before and made his face the rotting one that gets peeled off and added to the creature during surgery….which unnerved the crew on the day.

The sculpture by Christina Kortum and Brian Sipe broke down into a foam latex cowl, and three different silicone pieces as well as a lip retractor. There was a change to sewing the pieces together instead of staples before filming.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CRYPT TV

IT'S SPENCER CHARNAS' SPOOKY WORLD: WE JUST LIVE (AND DIE) IN IT

DIGGING INTO THE HORROR ORIGINS OF ICE NINE KILLS' HORROR-OBSESSED FRONTMAN.

BY BRIAN COLLINS

If you were to travel about 40 miles west of Boston, Massachusetts, to a little town called West Berlin, you might stumble upon a nondescript barn next to a house a bit off the road from a faded "For Sale" sign. One might assume it was just an everyday abandoned property, but as any New England monster kid from the '80s and '90s can tell you, it's the former location of the original incarnation of "America's Horror Theme Park," also known as Spooky World.

Running through September and October, this mini park was an annual must-attend event for anyone who ever so much as thumbed through an issue of FANGORIA, promising haunted houses, horror celebs like Kane Hodder and Robert Englund, and the park's centerpiece hayride, which would take you past mad scientist labs, homes of chainsaw-wielding psychos, and even Tromaville. Today such places are a dime a dozen, but at the time there was nothing quite like it, with fans traveling across the country to check it out and big name entertainment shows of the era highlighting it in their Halloween-time coverage.

But for some, it was too scary.

"The first time I went to Spooky World, I chickened out. Someone jumped out at me before the ticket line, and I just turned to my dad and said 'I WANT TO GO HOME, NOW.'" A surprising reveal from none other than Ice Nine Kills frontman Spencer Charnas, who (like this author) grew up in suburban Massachusetts and was enticed by Spooky World's familiar goblin mascot, advertised throughout New England every fall. He was only seven years old at the time of his first attempt to go, but turning eight didn't make any difference: "The next year I got the courage to go again and the same thing happened. Got scared in the parking lot, begged to go home. So the third year my dad was like, 'If you don't go in this year, I'm never taking you again.'"

The third time was indeed the charm. "My first year was 1995. I still have a signed *Halloween 6* lobby card from George Wilbur," Charnas proudly tells us. A celebrity guest was on hand every night the park was open, and meeting these icons without having to travel to Los Angeles or New York for one of the FANGORIA Weekend of Horrors conventions was a gift. "You could meet Michael Myers, you could meet Jason... every year I would look forward to it." There's even a documentary about the park coming, featuring Charnas himself. "I've since become friends with the people making the documentary and weaseled my way into doing an interview. I'm really excited to be part of something that influenced me."

As anyone who has listened to Ice Nine Kills' two *Silver Scream* albums can attest, that influence runs deep; it's in no way shocking to learn that the band's primary songwriter's love of the genre started early. The singer's "horror origin" is the same as a million other kids, in that he was attracted to lurid VHS covers. "I vividly remember *Halloween*, with the pumpkin and the knife, the *Friday the 13th* silhouette, *Sleepaway Camp 2* with the backpack and all the masks... I just became obsessed with this imagery. So I begged my parents to let me rent *Halloween*, that was the one I wanted to see first. And that's what started my life-long addiction."

This "addiction" naturally began to inform Charnas' day job, which he started in high school (back then the group was called Ice Nine; the "Kills" got added later). The band's first few albums had some horror references here and there, but it wasn't until after their third LP *The Predator Becomes the Prey* that things started moving into that direction full throttle. "We did a track to satisfy our fans in between albums, called 'Me, Myself & Hyde,' about Jekyll and Hyde. The song is [performed by] both personalities, and it came out really cool. So when it was time to do a new album I thought, 'Hey what if we followed that formula and every song is about a book?'"

The band wasn't sure at first, but it worked: 2015's *Every Trick in the Book* (which tackles *Romeo & Juliet* and *Go Ask Alice* alongside a few notable horror classics like *Dracula* and *Carrie*) was their highest charting album yet, thanks in part to the band's promotion. "We did music videos that for the first time were really cinematic, and then that album did better than anything we'd done; it seemed like we were moving in the right direction. And because we had a theme, it got people in the door to listen to us. So when it was time to do the next album I thought, 'We did books, but movies are my entire life other than music. I know these movies like the back of my hand; I can quote every line from Dr. Loomis to Frank Drebin.'"

Again, the gamble paid off: 2018's *The Silver Scream* was a huge success, debuting at #29 on the Billboard 200 Album chart (yes, people still buy albums) and giving them their first top 10 hit: "A Grave Mistake," which was an homage to *The Crow*. The other songs on the album were inspired by

PHOTOS BY ADAM REED

FROM SUBURBAN MASSACHUSETTS TO CONCERT ARENAS: ICE NINE KILLS' SPENCER CHARNAS TEARS UP THE STAGE.

other well-known classics (*Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm St*, *Jaws*, etc.), but they also dug a little deeper with "Merry Axe-mas," a tribute to *Silent Night, Deadly Night*. A bonus track called "Your Number's Up" tackled *Scream*, Charnas' all-time favorite film and the first scary movie he got to see in theaters. He recalls: "The buzz was going around that *Scream* was scarier than *Halloween*, that's all I needed to hear. I just remember that, as soon as the killer started talking about Michael and quizzing her about Jason (and by the way, at 11 years old I knew the right fucking answer! I knew she was wrong when she said it was Jason!), I knew right then and there that it was going to be my favorite movie of all time. It took everything I loved about these '80s slashers and put it in this cauldron."

that the songs were about (the lone song on *Silver Scream* that's not part of a franchise is "The World in My Hands," a tribute to *Edward Scissorhands*). *The Silver Scream 2: Welcome to Horrorwood* debuted in 2021 and actually outsold the original. And like the original, the band released several singles with accompanying cinematic music videos, all of which are bookended by an ongoing serialized story of Charnas being suspected of murdering his fiancé. These videos feature genre mainstays like Bill Moseley (as the detective on Charnas' trail), Scout Taylor-Compton, and even Joe Bob Briggs as the judge in the subsequent murder trial (FANGORIA fans should also keep an eye out for a particularly handsome yet quiet attorney in those scenes), along with deep-cut easter egg references to horror films.

able to watch R-rated horror.

"As we expanded the *Silver Scream* universe, the age gap of our fans [widened]. We see little kids, like five or six years old, coming up with their parents and they're all fans! It's one of the best things... it reminds me of watching *The Simpsons* with my dad when I was a kid, and how we both enjoyed it on different levels." It helps that the band references modern cultural mainstays like Ghostface and Pennywise, as other horror-themed rock bands like White Zombie and The Misfits were looking deep into the genre's past for their inspiration. For those forebears, who Charnas readily acknowledges ("We wouldn't be here without White Zombie and Slipknot"), they were using the Universal Monsters and '60s cult horror for their reference points, which might be a bit too dated for a younger generation taking an interest in the genre. But what kid doesn't know who Chucky is?

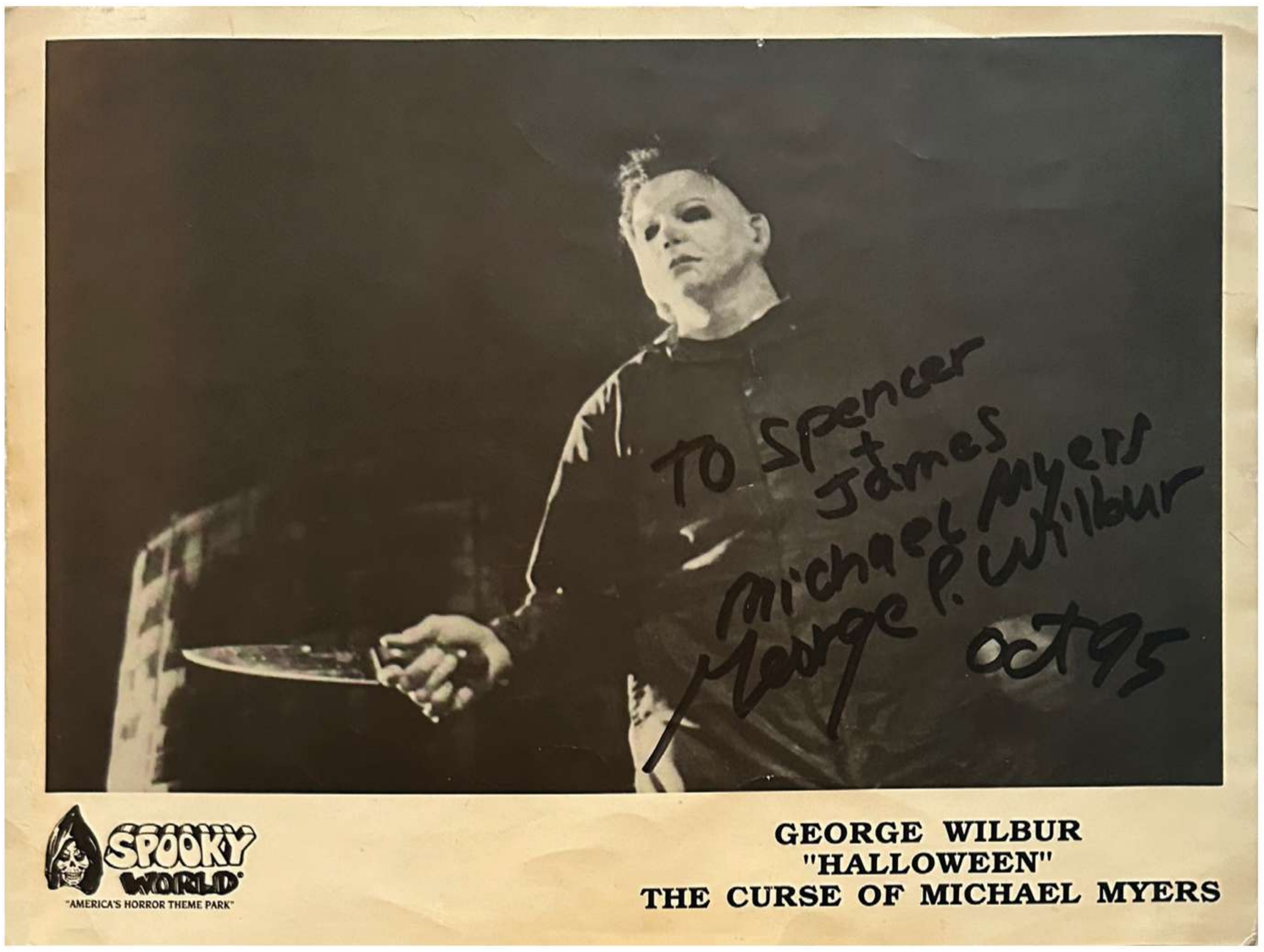
The videos give curious youngsters even more ways to expand their horizons, as Charnas often dresses as the film's villain and recreates key moments from the songs' namesake films. There's also a hook to keep watching; the narrative thread running through these videos is movie-like in its execution. Naturally, this has gotten Charnas and the band thinking about making the leap into a full-blown Ice Nine Kills feature film. But it won't be like *Kiss Meets The Phantom of the Park*. "*Ice Nine Kills meets Weekend at*

"I VIVIDLY REMEMBER *HALLOWEEN*, WITH THE PUMPKIN AND THE KNIFE, *THE FRIDAY THE 13TH* SILHOUETTE, *SLEEPAWAY CAMP 2* WITH THE BACKPACK AND ALL THE MASKS... I JUST BECAME OBSESSED WITH THIS IMAGERY. SO I BEGGED MY PARENTS TO LET ME RENT *HALLOWEEN*, THAT WAS THE ONE I WANTED TO SEE FIRST. AND THAT'S WHAT STARTED MY LIFE-LONG ADDICTION." -SPENCER CHARNAS

That song appeared on a deluxe reissue of *Silver Scream*, the sort of thing a band only gets to do when they've become successful enough to warrant one. The increased exposure has added a few wrinkles to the process, but not in the way you might think. "It's like when a book gets adapted; we get to put our own spin on it," Charnas explains, "But it adds a different pressure, because we want the song to be as good as the movie is." Not that it's grown tiresome, though. Far from it: "It's so much fun to write these songs, because it [involves] taking something I already loved and then applying that creative process, working in references and homages to musical motifs. It was such a rewarding thing to go through that writing process, for that one and *Welcome to Horrorwood*."

Welcome to Horrorwood is the band's latest album, a *Silver Scream* sequel in the same vein of its predecessor, keeping with the Roman numeral-addled tradition of the films

The songs are also gateways for younger fans who may not have parents as lenient as Spencer's were when it came to how early they're



Bernies 2 might be more up my alley," he jokes. "But a film is 100% the plan. We want a movie that's an extension of the band… but we definitely want to do it in a way where, even if you don't know the band, you will enjoy it. We got ideas, we're talking to writers and producers about putting something together. That is one of my bucket list goals."

Fitting a movie into the band's increasingly busy schedule might be the biggest hurdle, as they're currently on a massive world tour with none other than Metallica that will last well into 2024. And a new album will likely come along, as well, though it might not be *Silver Scream 3D*, especially since they've already tackled most of the big guns in horror. "Once we run out of movies, what the fuck are we gonna do?" Charnas laughs. "People are clamoring for part three, but maybe we will do something in the interim that's a bit different, because we don't want to get stale. But at the same time, everyone's asking me, 'When are you gonna do a song about this horror or that horror?'"

And in a full circle moment, this fall marks the second Silver Scream Convention in Danvers, MA, allowing Spencer to return to the area where his love of the genre began, now commanding the same kind of autograph lines he used to wait in at Spooky World. "We get young fans saying they got into horror because of us, or they only had heard of the deeper cut movies like *Silent Night, Deadly Night* or *My Bloody Valentine* because of us. That's so awesome — our songs being to some kid what those movies were to me. Really puts a smile on my face." Let's just hope those kids all make it past the parking lot. 💀

SPOOKY KID MAKES GOOD: CHARNAS IS POSSESSED BY A LIFELONG LOVE OF THE GENRE (AS EVIDENCED BY HIS SIGNED GEORGE WILBUR PIC, OPPOSITE).

PHOTOS BY MATT AKANA

BY ERIC VESPE

BLESSINGS FROM THE KING

KING WILL SOMETIMES CAST HIMSELF IN HIS OWN PICTURES, AS A LITTLE PET PROJECT.

ASIDE FROM HIS OWN WORK, THE AUTHOR HAS SHAPED THE HORROR LANDSCAPE IN WAYS THAT MIGHT SURPRISE YOU.

Stephen King is most famous for being a novelist, but the man has worn many hats outside of his chosen profession. He is also a frequent screenwriter, a one-time director, and even an occasional film critic.

Well, that might be pushing it. Let's call it "movie enthusiast." For many years King had a regular column in *Entertainment Weekly* in which he'd share his opinions on everything from the newest movies to how much he hates pre-screening theater advertisements. The man was never afraid to share his point of view on a movie, even if that opinion cut against the critical consensus. *Especially* then.

Was that arrogance on King's part, or just big "I don't give a shit what you think" energy? I guess that's up for everyone reading to decide, but what I will say for King is that while he never minces words when it comes to the stuff he hates (go look up his thoughts on Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* if you want to really see him tear into a movie), he also realizes the power he can wield when it comes to the movies and TV he loves, and he has used that power to elevate underdog titles that have now become cornerstones of the genre.

A famous example of this is his love of *The Evil Dead*, which he saw at an early Cannes trade screening before it had any kind of distribution. King was so impressed by Sam Raimi's scrappy little horror picture that he called it "the most ferociously original horror film of the year" in his review for *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, and allowed Raimi to use that quote on the poster.

Keep in mind this is 1982, back when King was the biggest name in horror after publishing back-to-back bangers like *Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Stand* and *The Dead Zone*. Having his name on the poster, vouching for this little horror movie with no known stars, was enough to garner it its first sales, get Raimi's film into theaters and attract genre fans to buy their tickets. Quite a few tickets, as it turned out.

That's a pretty well-known story, but what's *not* as well-known is that King had a hand in getting *Evil Dead 2* made, as well. Bruce Campbell revealed this in a 2018 interview with *Consequence of Sound*'s Michael Roffman.

Despite the financial success of *The Evil Dead*, Raimi and his crew were having trouble finalizing funding for the sequel. Campbell says they had a woman working with them at the time who had to be let go because the money simply wasn't coming in. The movie was ready to fall apart before it even started shooting! So, what'd she do? Well, she went to work with Dino De Laurentiis in North Carolina, where he was producing a slew of movies… one of which happened to be Stephen King's ill-fated directorial debut, *Maximum Overdrive*.

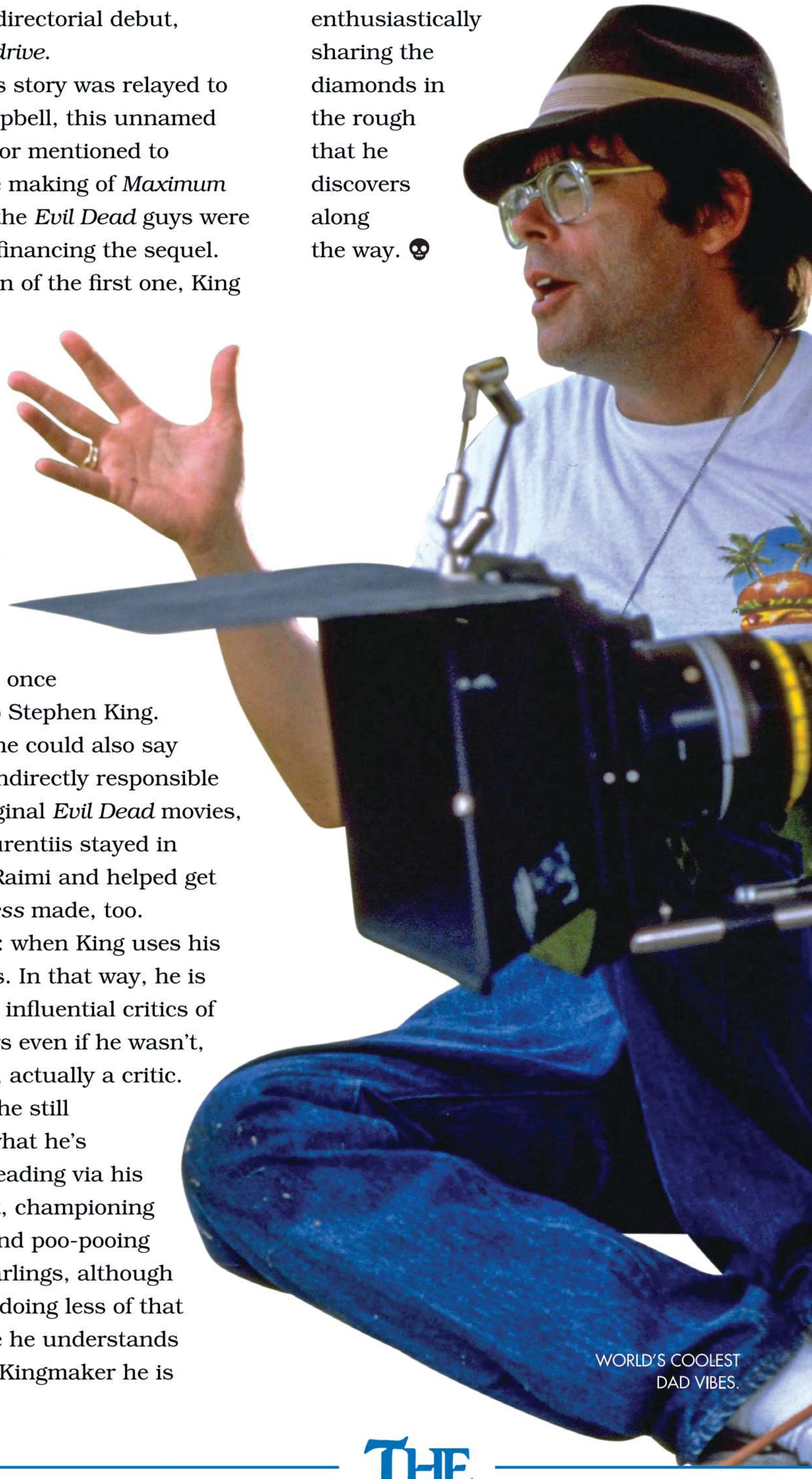
The way this story was relayed to Raimi and Campbell, this unnamed assistant director mentioned to King during the making of *Maximum Overdrive* that the *Evil Dead* guys were having trouble financing the sequel. Being such a fan of the first one, King convinced De Laurentiis, who was all-in on Stephen King at the time, to step up and fund the movie. He did, and history got its greatest horror-comedy, once again thanks to Stephen King.

I suppose one could also say that King was indirectly responsible for all three original *Evil Dead* movies, because De Laurentiis stayed in business with Raimi and helped get *Army of Darkness* made, too.

The point is: when King uses his voice, it matters. In that way, he is one of the most influential critics of the last 40 years even if he wasn't, funnily enough, actually a critic.

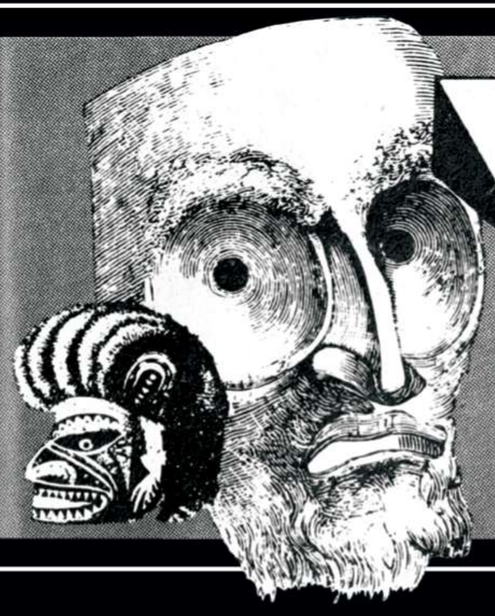
To this day he still comments on what he's watching and reading via his Twitter account, championing the underdog and poo-pooing some critical darlings, although he seems to be doing less of that recently. Maybe he understands how much of a Kingmaker he is (pardon the pun) and has pulled back on the negativity a bit, choosing instead to elevate the material he likes (recent examples include the upcoming *Late Night with the Devil* and, fittingly, *Evil Dead Rise*) instead of trashing what he doesn't. Or maybe he's just softened in his old age.

Whatever the case may be, it's clear that King's voice is as strong as it ever was, and I hope he keeps the passion for seeking out new entertainment and enthusiastically sharing the diamonds in the rough that he discovers along the way. 💀


WORLD'S COOLEST DAD VIBES.

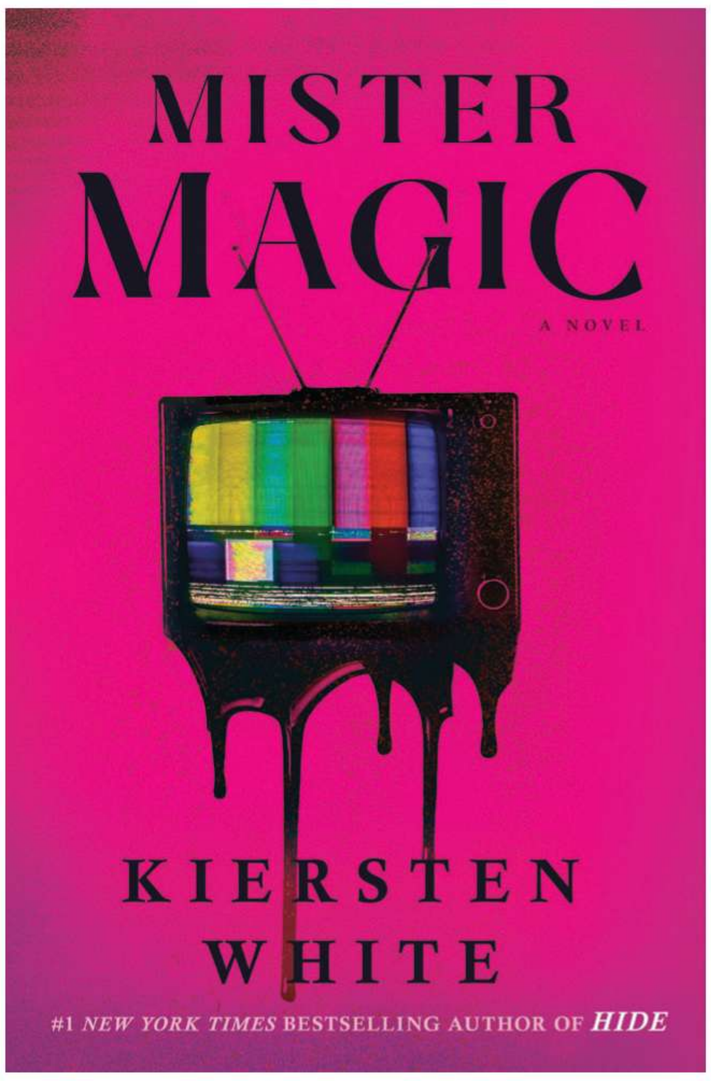
You can listen to Scott Wampler (@ScottWamplerRIP) and Eric Vespe (@EricVespe) every Wednesday on THE KINGCAST (@Kingcast19), a Stephen King podcast for Stephen King obsessives, brought to you by the FANGORIA Podcast Network.

THE KINGCAST



NIGHTMARE LIBRARY

BY AHLISSA EICHHORN



MISTER MAGIC

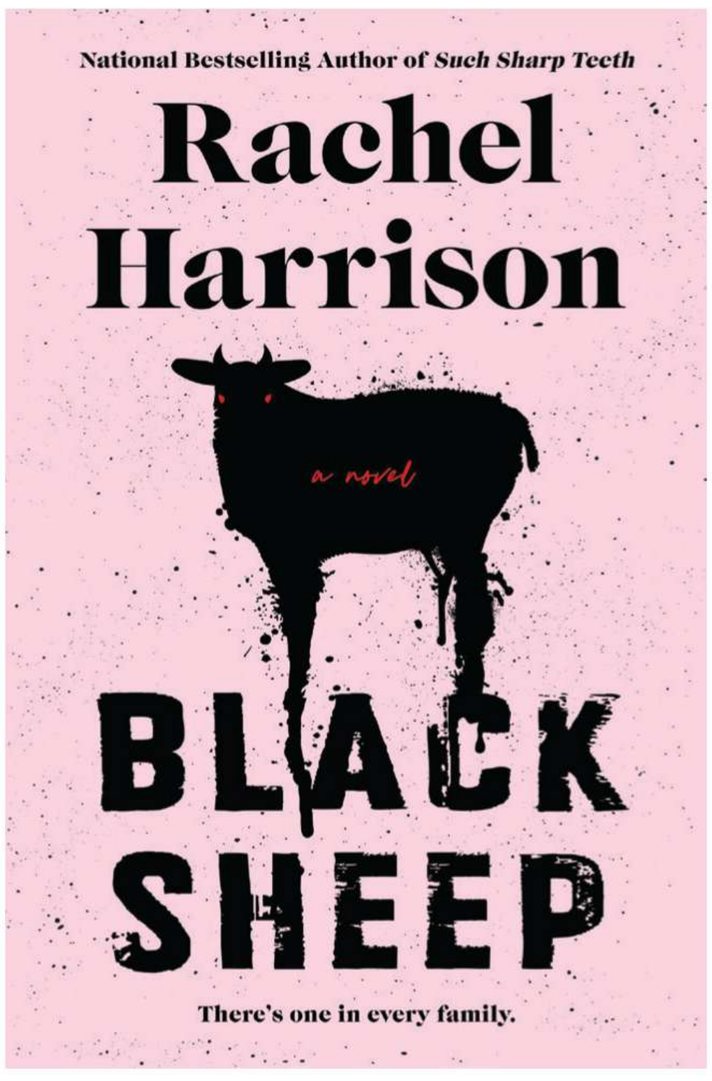
DUE OUT:
08/08/2023

AUTHOR:
Kiersten White

PUBLISHER:
Del Rey

It's been 30 years since the popular children's show *Mister Magic* was shut down after an on-set accident. The final episode became a fever dream — the show itself a rumor. Fans have scoured the internet for proof of the show's existence and the whereabouts of the former cast members, finding no video footage, records, or the identity of the show's mysterious caped host. Doubts are quelled once a reunion podcast is announced and the former castmates meet up at the remote studio they spent their childhood in. Hazy memories crash over the five friends as they try to answer the questions surrounding the strange show, and pinpoint exactly what happened the day the magic went away.

Mister Magic is a powerhouse of an allegory. The imaginative premise is grounded in White's personal experiences with faith, and the payoff is as heartbreaking as it is rattling. The creepy *Chanel Zero*-esque plot brings to light forgotten fears of youth, especially with such a ubiquitous villain. Email clippings and Reddit threads integrated in the text sweep readers into a conspiracy rabbit hole that feels all too real. This kind of book touches upon many types of pain points, and it's up to the reader which bruise they'd like to examine. It expresses the joyful nostalgia that every adult chases and turns it against you, forcing you to see the darkness that always stood behind it.



BLACK SHEEP

DUE OUT:
09/19/2023

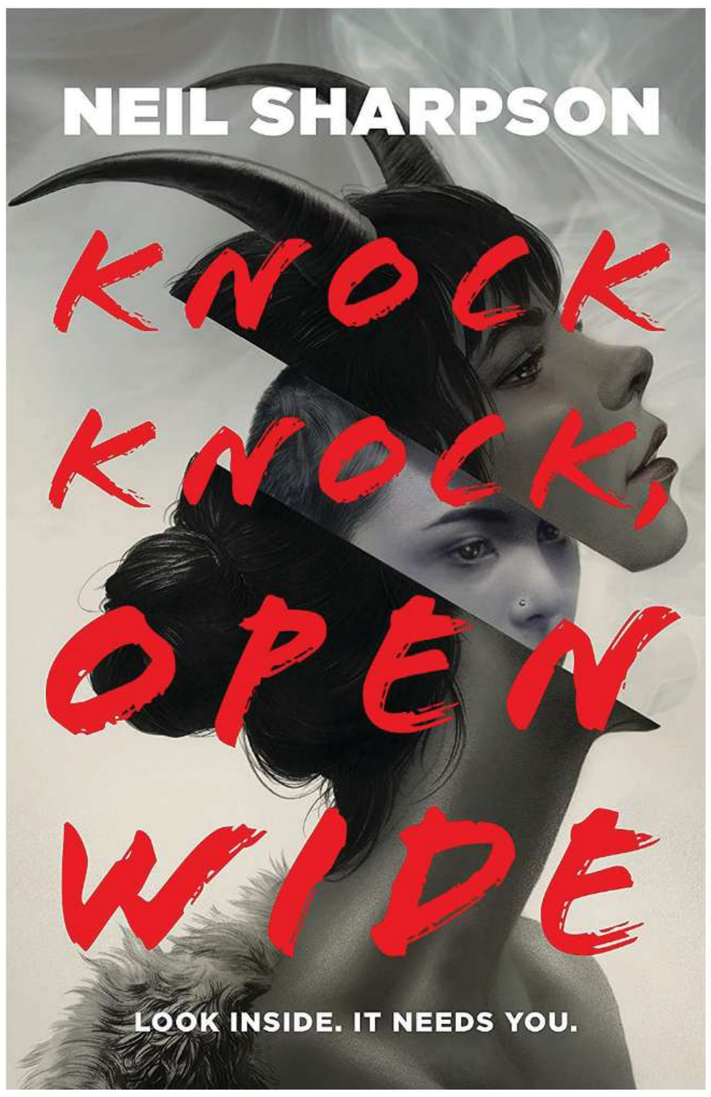
AUTHOR:
Rachel Harrison

PUBLISHER:
Berkley

Life has been different for Vesper Wright since fleeing her staunchly religious family. The pressure to worship something she doesn't believe was alleviated, and she'll never have to withstand the chill of her cold-hearted mother ever again. But after six years of blissful silence, a wedding invitation arrives on her doorstep and her need for closure takes the reins. Returning to the farm she grew up on means setting aside old grievances and tolerating her family's beliefs for a weekend of celebration. Yet, the festivities seem to shift gears once Vesper arrives. Overwhelmed with reopened wounds and the discovery of an impious secret, Vesper questions who she is, how much of her identity is based on her upbringing, and if she's gone totally insane.

Harrison has molded her own addictive niche of relatable heroines caught in unconventional (and usually supernatural) situations. *Black Sheep* may be the epitome of her brand, with its damaged but loveable protagonist that relies on cynicism and cheekiness to get through her hellacious experience. It's quick to the punch and never feels stagnant thanks to its rotation of cinematic characters. It's a balanced act of heavy soul-searching and genre appreciation. A toothsome amount of carnage appeases those who indulge in true crime and slashers, with enough heart and social commentary for the rest of us. All the turmoil concludes with the beautiful sentiment that our DNA doesn't decide who we are or who we choose to become.

BY DEFINITION, OUR FORMATIVE YEARS ARE BETWEEN BIRTH AND THE AGE OF 8.
This period is crucial for humans because the brain is rapidly developing and making lifelong impacts on our mental health, physical health, and future successes. This also means that the damage done in your formative years can really throw a wrench in the whole adulting thing. Not to worry though — most of us have a childhood wound or two, particularly the characters in the novels below. They face trauma that feels too scary to look back upon, and spoiler alerts be damned, they come out on top.



KNOCK KNOCK, OPEN WIDE

DUE OUT:
10/03/2023

AUTHOR:
Neil Sharpson

PUBLISHER:
Tor Nightfire

Etain Larkin has just said yes to a new beginning when she encounters a corpse on a dark country road. Despite the urgency to get home, she's compelled to drive the body to a lonely farmhouse that seems to be awaiting her arrival. She's held at the house for several days and she'll never speak of what happened there. Decades later, Ashling Mallen fights to understand the broken relationship she has with her alcoholic mother, Etain, and the many tragedies that haunt her family. Through her own research and collected whispers, she becomes obsessed with the idea that all the problems originate from a threatening black box featured on a kid's TV show and the people who protect it.

The high strangeness of *Knock Knock, Open Wide* hits you as soon as it begins. Platformed on traditional Irish mythology, author Neil Sharpson spins his own threads of lore into the story's fabric to equally unnerve and educate. Several themes, including generational trauma and queer relationships, are gracefully unfurled via multiple storylines and time jumps. The direct style of prose renders the unique angle digestible while the easygoing humor cuts through the heaviness. All of this is cocooned in a pitch-black mystery with some truly wicked visuals. This book addresses life lessons by reinvigorating Celtic horrors, making it the most unlikely fairytale you've ever read.

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CLASSIFIED AD VAULT

Contributors' Crypt

Here's where you can ollow some of our contributors on Instagram. Or you can get offline and go outside! Up to you.

Meredith Borders ..... @mereborders

Puis Calzada ..... @puiscalzada

Brian Collins ..... @brianwcollins

Barbara Crampton .. @barbaracrampton

David Dastmalchian ..... @dastmalchian

Ahlissa Eichhorn .. @hauntedbydeadlines

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas ..... @alexandra.heller.nicholas

Annie Rose Malamet ..... @girlsgutsgiallo

Richard Newby ..... @rnewb

Mark Phillips ..... @nightmares_unlimited

Amber T ..... @hornbloodfire

Eric Vespe ..... @ericvespe

Scott Wampler ..... @mayorofdoorcity

Things to Come

It's spooky season again! This fall will see a new *Exorcist*, a new *V/H/S*, a new season of *Chucky*, and a new Lovecraft adaptation featuring Barbara Crampton! As Agent Cooper said, "What year is this?"

Happy birthday to the legend, Dorina Arellano!

Congrats A & J!

Long live Ookie!

Happy birthday to the lovely and talented Brandon Wainerdi!

When in Philly, hit up Monster Vegan for delicious food and spooky vibes!

Bayern, hier wir kommen

Are you in need of a public-domain movie idea? Head on over to Francisco Peppermints' Amityville Emporium. Amityvilles from the future, in space, on the Titanic, in a corn field, from the Jurassic period, equipped with smart tech, and more. We got 'em all, baby! Head on over to FranciscoPeppermints.com for all your Amityville needs.

Happy birthday to the coolest creep at Fango, Angel Melanson!

25 years, Gomesita? How did I get this lucky? Hope my luck holds up for another 25. <3

Does M3GAN dream of electric sheep?

Love and appreciation to my whole team who gets this magazine off the ground and onto shelves every quarter!

Happy birthday to Fango hero Meredith Borders!

RIP Nat from *Yellowjackets*. You will always be my favorite character - Reyna

Read more *Chainsaw Man*.

For fans of Horror and Monsters, or just looking for a SFX makeup artist? Follow @terra.sfx on IG for all the gory details.

Are you reading Stephen Graham Jones? Start with his novels *Mongrels* and *The Only Good Indians*. If you love slashers, head straight for *My Heart Is A Chainsaw* and its sequel *Don't Fear The Reaper*. And, of course, read his column SlasherNation in FANGORIA!

NEW POSITIONS IN ELDRITCH CULT NOW OPEN: Have YOU ever experienced visions of vistas unknown, vast and terrible? Felt the need to peer into the darkest corners of the world? Most importantly, have you ever desired transcendence from this mortal coil? Then please inquire for membership into the prestigious Order of Bato-El! Please note that membership is permanent until you expire (naturally or unnaturally) and life insurance is a must.

The Waffle Press: A professionally unprofessional group of podcasters focusing on the past, present and future of cinema with retrospectives, reviews and interviews. Follow on Twitter @TheWafflePress

For a good time seek out the Cult Classic Club twice a month at Enzian Theater in Orlando. Fun films on 35mm like god intended. - Angel

What evils lurk at Herbert West Industries? Listen no further than our Call of Cthulhu podcast: The Lovecraft Tapes. Discover more horror at LovecraftTapes.com

Check out the Spooky Doings podcast. 2 improv comedians talk about all things horror. There's interviews, discussions, tutorials & more. Available on apple, Spotify & podbean.

Hi Alyssa! Thanks for all the love and support while I put this magazine together and making sure I keep my sanity and drink water. - Jason❤

FANGORIA
COLORS
OF THE
DARK
JOIN HOSTS DR. REBEKAH MCKENDRY (PROFESSOR, FANGORIA, WRITER-DIRECTOR) AND ELRIC KANE (PROFESSOR, PURE CINEMA PODCAST, FILMMAKER) AS THEY TAKE A DEEP LOOK AT THE HORROR GENRE.
Each show explores a specific part of horror history, key players, franchises, deep cut titles, important films, and interviews with some of the genres' biggest icons.
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You ooze,
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